PAULA BRUKMÜLLER

Flowers from Greece

The autobiography of the journalist who turned a personal tragedy into an inspiring world tour.

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Annotation

“Flowers from Greece” requires a warning preface: humor will not be used as camouflage in any line of this book. Not a word. Instead of the masterful device invented by Jane Austen and used wisely by women in autobiographies and fictions that hit the “bestseller” lists, Paula Brukmüller takes a deep breath (if by the sea, even better) and strips down, completely and entirely, right in front of the reader. Paula uses her personal tragedy of successive miscarriages, attempts to get pregnant, and the breakup of a marriage, moving to a city in which she was not born in, as a backhoe excavator. While completing a world tour, alone and with a backpack on her back, she seeks out who she wants to be, but mostly pulls from herself lost pleasures of her own femininity, and turns out to be hedonistic, devout, sensual, suppressed, selfish, friend.

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Paula Brukmüller

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Preface

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The beginning of this journey is really "a miracle of the unconscious." Her conversation with her father in Cappadocia is a tenderness. Her stalker in Greece is unbearable. Her 10 years younger lover is a delight. Her drunkenness with two friends in Thailand is wild.

In this nearly 400-day journey through dozens of countries, she doesn't use filters. Her brave leap of a cliff that defies the blue of the Mediterranean Sea and leaves her with a red butt and a lot of shame. Nude bathing in a secret waterfall in the Chilean desert is liberating, but she also experiences the arid path there.

They are side by side: the filthy red ceramic floor, the cold in Russia, rats, hunger, extravagance, lack of money, visas denied in Oceania, tears, orgasms, insecurities, topless, extortion in Thailand, drunkenness, hangovers, forgotten names in Atacama, breathtaking landscapes.

By facing her vulnerability so organically, Paula risks being admired, hated, and, in a time of judgment as liquid as relationships, condemned. But the decision to expose the journey itself is not a literary resource. It is an atonement, cycle closure, a healing process.

A path that ends up challenging, beyond conventions, the comfort of the reader. Because, as warned earlier, the sense of relief brought by comedy, as Elizabeth Gilbert did, for example, is replaced by pressure. Paula clashes, but only on herself, and turns the reader into a voyeur of the entire process. This is not a sad book, and this "hero's journey" may even help the reader, but this is not a self-help book either. "Flowers from Greece" may fit better among travel titles. After all, what is proposed here is really a journey (and with tips on how to go around the world with little money but a lot of emotion). I, who

had the honor of meeting her in one of the parts of this trip and embarked with her when reviewing this book, I have only to thank for the discomfort, the tears, the joy: here are some “Flowers from Lisbon, Paula!”

Raquel Lima

1 – THE MIRACLE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

The smell of coffee coming from the kitchen brought a message of love and care. It was only 6am and my mom would have left my breakfast ready in the previous night, if my trip had been in different conditions.

I put my most comfortable jeans on and I decided to go makeup free. Before closing my suitcase, I looked at the plastic bag with my wrapped costume on the corner of my bedroom for the last time, together with the other cardboard boxes filled with books, DVDs, photographs and files. Different from what happened every year, I didn't feel like dressing up for Carnival.

The last place I wanted to be in that holiday was Rio de Janeiro. What I really wanted was a dark bedroom and a sedative strong enough to make me sleep for a whole year. I could even imagine myself waking up after several months and seeing all my problems solved. Someone would be holding my hand smiling and saying "Come this way. Your new life is ready."

Since there is no magic formula to come back when you're down in the dumps, I decided to do something different from binging on a TV show and eating tons of calories. By the way, I was incapable of doing even that. I could spend countless days with nothing in my stomach and I would still not feel hungry.

It has been less than a month since I came back to my mother's house. I could still feel the effects of the emotional tsunami that swept away everything in my life. However, despite the unbearable pain, a stubborn optimism insisted on telling me that everything was happening for a good reason. It was a weak voice that, amid a paralysing fear, I could barely hear. But it was a constant voice: "Hold on, it shall pass. Nothing lasts."

I returned to the Wonderful City with a funeral face. The boiling sun and a temperature around 40°C was an invitation to the carnival revelers to quench their thirst with warm beer cans mixed with cheap cachaça.[1]

The costumes were more creative than ever, with humorous political appeals and clever insights of commercial products, but I didn't see much color at the party. Even so, I enjoyed Carnival with friends, making a supernatural effort to smile.

On the outside, I was rock hard. "It's life," I would say to anyone who asked how I was doing. "Every cloud has a silver lining" and even a "thank God" I let go out of my mouth. Inside, however, I shouted

the opposite. And when you mix beer with rejection, the result is always bizarre. I swear I didn't recognize myself.

Hiding behind my sunglasses, I often cried in the middle of the revelry and texted horrible messages on my cell phone. I'm not ashamed neither I regret anything. It was important to exhaust the pain. It is also part of the process.

After the Momo's[2] party, I hid myself at a friends' house in Recreio dos Bandeirantes,[3] and then I realized that I was the only person who could help myself.

I was never hungry, so I had lost six pounds. I knew I had to eat and I struggled to feed myself at every meal, even if it meant eating small quantities. Looking back, I feel proud of myself. No one could have done that for me. I was stronger than I realized.

I went to the condo gym almost everyday and I would listen to guided meditations while sunbathing by the pool. One day I realized that if I was pregnant I would not have the privilege of giving myself those days off. By the way, I couldn't even imagine how everything would have been different.

I had a flight already booked to Bahia. My best friend, Michelle, gave it to me as a gift and she even put me in touch with her sister, who has a Bed and Breakfast in Trancoso. I would stay there in exchange for 3 hours a day worth of work.

A day before boarding I had a restless night. I drank wine before going to bed and I woke up several times, feeling as if an anvil was pressing onto my chest. It was still the pain. That sharp and deep one.

I sat on my bed at dawn and I stared at the light coming through the window. I cried and called for my father's name. I asked him to come in spirit to help me. I felt completely lost and I just wanted a supernatural voice to tell me what to do. I needed a sign from beyond, because I couldn't hear anything inside me, amid that hellish noise of fear and guilt.

I fell asleep crying and I forgot to set the alarm to ring. My flight was at 8am and I was about 40 minutes away from the airport. By a miracle of my unconscious, I woke up 2 hours and 30 minutes before my boarding time.

2 – CRYING MY EYES OUT

I meditated for eight minutes on the morning of January 10th. It had been less than three months since I had started that practice and I was already happy with my progress. In the early days, keeping my eyes closed for three minutes was almost torture.

I drank a glass of green juice, ate a banana, and left with the protein shake in my hands. Before I went to the gym, I still had to go to the Journalist Union to sign my contract of resignation with the radio and TV station I worked with for the last four years as an online content publisher. I also had to go to the bank to transfer the money for our new car. It was a busy day.

Felipe had already sold his car and he got my car that morning to go to the real estate to sign the lease of our house. We got a couple interested in having our furnished house, and this time, I would just need to take our clothes and personal items. Moving to Belém do Pará was getting closer and closer and everything was flowing perfectly fine.

After working out, I ate green chicken salad for lunch at the restaurant next to the gym and I walked my way to the fertilization clinic. This was our second attempt and a supernatural optimism dominated my mind that day. I secretly promised myself to give up getting pregnant if it didn't work this time.

All my pregnancies had stopped developing before 12 weeks. Three of my four miscarriages were retained, forcing me to undergo curettage surgeries. However, this time, I was confident. we had finally found out that my body was making antibodies against Felipe's DNA and we were able to begin a proper treatment for our case.

Felipe left the real estate agency and he went to the medical clinic to pick me up. I've spent the last three hours getting immunoglobulin injected in my veins, but I was feeling full of energy. The last appointment of the day was to deliver my car to the dealership and get our new car. A zero-kilometer SUV with plenty of room for our labrador and all the stuff for the baby that was on the way.

After all the paperwork, as we got into the new car outside before going home. Felipe looked at me with youthful excitement.

- It's amazing how everything happened at the same day, isn't it?! he said, smiling and caressing the steering wheel. "We can leave for Belém right now if we want to!"

- Close your eyes – I said pulling his hand and intertwining his fingers with mine, while also closing my eyes – Imagine the two of us arriving in Rio de Janeiro in this car, a year from now. In the back seat, the baby in his car seat and Max with his tongue out. That's what

will happen. We're going to Belém but only for a year. We'll have our baby, you'll pass the test and we'll go to Praia Vermelha afterwards.

Felipe opened his eyes, kissing my hand and my lips, he unlocked the brake and sped up while the new rubber of the tires made a sharp noise on the dealer's waxed floor.

Five days later, during our vacation in Rio, I was on the same brown leather seat, crying my eyes out and taking off my wedding ring while Felipe was driving in silence.

3 – ON VACATION

While boarding the ferry to cross the Bunharém River, between Porto Seguro and Arraial d'Ajuda, I felt like crying. I could still see myself with a melancholic look on the horizon. Messy hair swaying against the wind and a secret hope for better days.

One of my first whims during the divorce week was to contact the company where I have worked to ask for my job back. My resignation was just over a month ago because we would move to Pará and my manager was delighted with the possibility of my return. He considered me the best editor on the team.

However, before I was forced to resign over another of my husband's professional transfers, I was no longer happy doing that job. I used to edit stories about tragic accidents and bloody crimes, many of them involving children, and all of this had been causing me a lot of anxiety.

It took me over a week to give a final answer to the company. Before that, my friend Michelle convinced me that I could – and deserved – to take some time for myself.

Despite knowing that such a break was necessary, I arrived at Trancoso feeling guilty about being on vacation while I should be figuring out my future. After all, I was unemployed, divorced, and living temporarily in my mother's house, from which I had left over 20 years ago.

When I arrived by van in Trancoso, I was greeted by one of the B&B's partners, a Brazilian from Santa Catarina with a broad almost childlike smile, whose name was Edu. He helped me with my luggage and showed me where I would stay.

My room was simple. A wooden bunk bed, a child seat in place of the bedside table, air conditioning, a stained mirror on the wall, and a dream catcher hanging on the center of the plank window. The floor was made of rough cement with a patterned rug that took up all the space on the side of the bed. A shelf on the wall and a hammock outside completed my space. I used the upstairs bed as a closet and I can still remember the smell of rain during my nightly meditations.

On my first night in Bahia, I had several beers with Edu and I summed up my life story with a mixture of grudge and wry humor. I was not ready to share my wounds. I was still telling my story through a victimized perspective..

I had fun with Edu and his jokes and silly games, we ended up kissing and I regretted it immediately. How could I have kissed the owner of the place where I would work on the first day?

I woke up the next morning full of guilt and terrible judgments

about myself. I went to Nativos Beach, where I stretched my beach towel, right where the Trancoso River meets the sea, and, to further increase my embarrassment, Edu followed me.

We dived together and I struggled to demonstrate that last night's kiss had been nothing but an insignificant mistake.

I told him I'd like to be alone, and after he left, I closed my eyes, feeling the bright sun burning on my shoulders. The wind which was blowing nonstop relieved the heat and I began to cry, hearing the sound of the waves and the sound of birds. I cried again, all the pain still consuming me. I remembered the goodbye, I remembered our desperate weeping on the staircase of our house. Lost on each other's embrace on the floor, seeing our life together crumbles and knowing we were unable to rebuild our castle. We swore to still love the other, but we knew our marriage was in a terminal stage.

I let my tears run through all the hurt, anger, love, sadness and fear of what was yet to come. I regretted the end once more, but I had stopped asking the reasons why everything happened. When my heart unburdened yet another ocean of pain, I grabbed my notebook and wrote my first self-love letter. I had committed to do so while still in my flight to Bahia.

I left dozens of letters scattered around the house before leaving for good. I poured my heart out in my best lines in messages to Felipe but I've never given myself the same comforting words.

That morning, I looked at myself as if I was looking at my best friend. What would I say to that woman after hearing such deep pain? How could I help her? What words could bring some comfort and help her face reality at the same time?

No one better than myself should tell the words she needed to hear. I was the only human being in the world who could understand the pain. It was like splitting myself into two people: my rational self, looking at the whole situation from a distance and telling my emotional self that everything would be alright.

> Trancoso – Bahia, 23 February, 2018.
>
> Dear friend,
>
> I know I've never made a habit of writing to you but we've been talking a lot these days and I feel I need to say how much I love you. I even think I should love you more. You deserve more. I swear I am doing the best I can to be with you in this time of pain and transition. I'm taking care of us the best way I can, and whenever I can, I'll try to take us back to the present.
>
> Because I love you so much, I would like for you to stop

wondering what our life would be like if things happened differently. Nothing can change the past. What's done is done.

You are the one who usually say that when you take a path, the others cease to exist. You can't go back and take the road on the right. It's already gone.

You can improve the path you are following now though. Plant flowers and dance in the rain if it falls. Sit down to watch the sunrise or sunset. Smile to those who cross your path.

I know it still hurts…

I know it still hurts…

My love, only I know how much it all still hurts because I'm the only one who can feel it with you. But we are so strong. Hold tight a little longer. I promise that soon things will get better. Hold my hand, darling. I am the only person who will still be with you until the end!

I love you so much and I want to love you even more.

4 – INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

The first days in Trancoso were filled with meditation, before sleeping and after waking up, and a lot of emotional confusion.

Google: How to get over a divorce?
Google: How to win your ex-partner back?
Google: How to silence your ego?

My mind, lazy and used to the life I took in the last 14 years, wanted to go back in time, no matter what.

It takes a lot of hard work to start from scratch, when everything was already in order, in your comfort zone, even when the situation wasn't exactly "comfortable." It gives us safety, precisely because we know how things work in that territory. It is easier for the mind to keep suffering from what it already knows than risking something completely new.

My job in the bed and breakfast, which was supposed to be helping with the guests breakfast and cleaning the rooms, ended up changing. By knowing of my previous experience as a web journalist, Cândice and João, the other business owners, asked me to take care of the social media and their two B&B ranking in the internet search engines.

I was working 3 hours a day, I had a small comfy room, a shower and breakfast. I could use the pool as much as I wanted to and I grabbed one of the bikes available in the B&B.

I started doing yoga and going to a simple gym in town every other day. Every morning, I would get up, do some meditation, write positive affirmations in my Reflective journal and tell myself: today I will do my best to feel good.

I also started having weekly appointments with Sidney, a holistic therapist who had traveled the world and then decided to settle down in southern Bahia, in a large and airy house surrounded by trees and wildlife. We used to talk for hours, and then he would perform a chakra balancing ritual for me.

At nightfall, when Bahia heat would give us a break, I would have a seat with Cândice and João by a bamboo lamp, under a cashew tree in the yard, and we would drink wine or beer.

By meeting their friends, I started making my own ones and gradually going to some barbecue parties and other parties in town.

Adding to my work and yoga mornings, along with my training and beach afternoons, soon I also started to have dance nights, new friends and beer. I began to go out on my own for fun and met a lot of

interesting people.

Advertisers and lawyers who left their successful young people status in cities like São Paulo and Salvador to work as waiters or receptionists in hotels on the beach.

Life began to show me that there were infinite possibilities to follow and I was free to choose any of them.

In that time of social life resumption, it didn't take long for the first flirtations to emerge, of course. Unlike the American writer Liz Gilbert, in "Eat, Pray, Love", I wasn't interested in leaving love to the end of the trip at all.

Of course, I didn't want to get into another serious relationship so fast. I was well aware that my wounds needed to heal to live a healthy relationship, as I wished and deserved. Still, I wanted to experiment and have fun without commitment. Despite the obvious risks, my self-esteem needed that external stimulus. And since I was willing to heal from serious relationships, it seemed right to have less serious ones and watch my own behaviour in each situation.

It wasn't as easy as it looked on these lines. The first time I tried to undress in front of a man was a disaster and I started crying. I left the guy in a very uncomfortable situation, thinking he was doing something wrong. I explained it wasn't his fault and told him to leave. I was totally embarrassed when I saw him the next day, but today I'm happy for respecting my own time. After that, I started making questions to myself before taking a step forward, and everything happened more naturally.

A month after landing in Trancoso, I was already feeling stronger, but deep inside, my ego was writhing. I was still living a kind of obsession. I kept checking Felipe's social network and couldn't leave the cell phone. Every day, I used to wait for his message asking me to go back to him and, at the same time, I asked the universe not to let him look for me, as I was willing to accept him back even though I knew I didn't want that life anymore.

One day, checking some lost information on Facebook messenger, I came across a hidden messages box that I didn't even know was there. I opened the message and couldn't quite understand where that had come from. A woman wanted to know if her "boyfriend" was really separated or if she was being tricked.

An intense rush of adrenaline ran through all over my body. I felt my hands tingling and they started shaking straight away. My heart, which hadn't been at its normal pace for weeks, sped up even more and my stomach turned.

It was official, I had lost my position forever.

As it was said in the message, Felipe was already introducing her to his friends as his girlfriend, but as she often sees him talking to me,

she wanted to make sure he wasn't tricking us both.

At first, it looked like she meant to mark territory. I was furious and I couldn't even think. I didn't even notice the message was already there for almost 30 days.

- Keep your girlfriends away from me. I don't want to know about your life. Please, tell them you're a widower. Tell them you've always been single. Make up any lie, but don't tell them my name.

After hanging up the phone without giving him time to answer, I did what I should have done as soon as we signed the divorce: I blocked him in all social networks and also his number, so he couldn't even call me. Finally, I cut all contact and began to recover my sanity.

I played the victim again for a night and looked for Cândice's support, I allowed myself to cry. Then, during our conversation, she made me realize the wish, still unconscious, of travelling the world.

- Paula, you need to take your focus off him and focus on a project of your own. Think of a dream you want to come true, do something to make yourself proud. While he's living his life, no one is living yours. What's your biggest dream?

I went to my room, stood in front of the mirror and stared at my thin and careless face, and cried again. When I realized I was starting to feel sorry for myself once again, I dried my tears and stared at myself.

- Who am I? What do I like? What do I want? This has to be my focus now. I have to be my own project of life. What's my biggest dream?

I booked a room in a hostel in Caraíva and packed a small backpack for the weekend. I wanted to go after my own answers. I didn't know I had already started to travel the world, but I knew I wanted to go alone.

5 – THE DEATH

I got on the first bus to Caraiva on a Friday morning. The sky was completely blue and the sun had just risen, but it was already burning badly. I put on the headphones and leaned my head against the window. Even before the trip began, the tears came instantly and I began to wonder why I was still suffering so much.

Walking down the aisle, the other passengers avoided sitting next to me. It was as if that seat was booked for myself. Then, mentally, I began to explain the root of my own suffering.

I felt like I was mourning for someone. It was as if his life had ended, as if Felipe had died. But I felt strange because the man I loved was still alive. Until I realized that someone had really died: me. At that moment a deep sob got into my chest and the pain was stronger than ever.

I was used to being that woman, I knew exactly what she had to do and how she should act. I already had all the plans for her life made and then I couldn't live any of it. It was as if my spirit watched everything through the veil of death. Another couple came into our house with our furniture. My dog was still there, the new car continued its journey, the hormone injections were paid, but the treatment wasn't over. My husband was in the city where I should have gone. Everything was still there but me. It was as if my soul wanted to go back to life, but my body was no longer there to get it. I became a ghost of myself.

It was about time to accept that ego had died. That wife no longer existed. That son would never be born and his mother never existed. I needed to mourn my own death to find out the woman I'd be from there.

I cried during the 40-minute journey and got into the canoe across the Caraíva River to the village carrying lots of pain and a decision: to bury the woman I had been in Caraíva so far.

Many people had already told me about Caraíva, but I couldn't imagine that magical place. The different energy I felt as soon as I stepped into the town. It was actually a village, there were over a thousand inhabitants and it's one of the oldest fishing villages in Brazil. Its location – between the river of the same name, the sea and an ecological reserve – doesn't allow cars. The streets are made of soft sand, so it's impossible to even cycle there. Horses only drag carts when it's necessary to transport stuff the residents, B&B's, and restaurants owners have bought.

I left my backpack in a room full of beds and walked along the empty beach, getting my feet wet in the waves of the sea until I found

the river. I chose a wooden chair and refreshed myself in the freshwater. I drank some coconut water, played the Brazilian singer Marisa Monte on the speaker, and spent the afternoon feeling the warmth of the sun and diving, sometimes in the sea, at times in the river.

During the sunset, I sat on the sand and tried to capture the beauty of that light in my mind. Why is it so hard to remember the details of that magical afternoon? I could relive those minutes many times. I said a farewell prayer, allowing my old self to go away peacefully, and went back to the hostel.

The hostel's owner told me the village tradition on Fridays was *Forró of Ouriço*[4] but before that there'd be a birthday celebration at the Caraíva Republic Pub and I was invited to join her friends. It was already low season and there were almost no tourists there.

I didn't feel awkward at any time. I met more people who left their office lives to live with sand on their feet. I danced funk, drank Netuno,[5] and in forró's time, the pub owner turned off the music, turned off the lights, and forced the entire party to migrate to Ouriço's bar.

I danced less than I would like to in my first forró in Caraíva, but I still had a lot of fun. When I realized an extra glass of Netuno could make me forget a part of the night, I grabbed a bottle of water and had fun dancing and laughing with Dani, a crazy and free Baiana[6] who was a gift from the universe.

Next day I woke up anxious. I couldn't understand the reason why for that emotional instability. I packed my backpack and tried to run away from myself. I crossed the river and got on the bus, determined to go back to Trancoso. But, Dani, the crazy and free baiana who I had met in the forró place, was on the same bus and shouted my name.

After explaining to me that she was looking for me in the forró place, she said she lived in Arraial d'Ajuda and invited me to stay in her house. I understood that reunion as a message from the universe and I didn't even get off the bus in Trancoso. I leaned my head against the window and dove into my own thoughts once again.

If I had buried the woman I used to be in Caraíva, I needed to find out what kind of woman I would be from that moment on.

My previous identity had been built on someone else's foundation. When that person was gone, everything I was collapsed. This time, I wanted to rebuild myself the right way. Then, looking at the dust from the road through the window, I began to think of the woman I wanted to become, and I painted a picture of her in my mind: intelligent, independent, brave, confident, cheerful, humorous. I already knew this woman, I knew what it was like to be that Paula.

She already existed and was sleeping somewhere inside me. I just needed to wake her up and was willing to do that.

6 – ASK SOMEONE TO DANCE

It was decided, Arraial d'Ajuda would be the lab of the woman I was recreating. After two beers at Dani's house, we went to Beco das Cores, a charming street full of bars and tourists.

Still very tired from the trip to Caraiva, we drank a few glasses and sang old-school rock'n roll hits together with a great band that was performing there. I met Dani's group of friends and we went home early.

On Sunday night, she took me to Forró of Santo Antônio.

I complained that I hadn't danced enough in the forró of Ouriço, in Caraiva, because almost nobody had asked me to dance. Dani sent the message: "If you wanna dance, go there and ask someone to dance."

I obeyed and decided that the new woman I was becoming would dance whenever she felt like it. Although I was never a good forró dancer, I found that I quite enjoyed the fun and energy of the dance. I stepped on the feet of some partners, but I'm sure they didn't care.

That same night, in a different bar, I met one of the guys I had invited to dance again, and we had so much fun together after I got his name wrong twice.

A captivating Mineiro[7] who had just got divorced but spoke of his ex-wife with love and gratitude.

Arraial d'Ajuda was so good that I only came back to Trancoso on Tuesday. I left with the promise to come back to Caraiva with Dani on the following weekend.

7 – BLUE FULL MOON

"We're getting the van in Arraial d'Ajuda, but the driver won't get in Trancoso. I already agreed that he'll stop at the road clover to wait for you. You have 30 minutes to get there."

It was Thursday, the eve of Good Friday holiday, and Dani didn't even give me room to think. I grabbed a bikini, three dresses, and a sarong, stuffed it into my backpack with my toothbrush and sunscreen and ran off to get a moto-taxi.

When I arrived in Caraiva again, I felt my chest speed up. That sense of anguish still insisted on following me, but I decided to accept the discomfort and throw myself into building the woman I wanted to be. There was still a lot of work to be done.

The forró of Ouriço was crowded on Good Friday because of Mariana Aydar's holiday show. I took advantage of the generous offer of dancers and danced with over ten people. With some, I danced twice, I danced with my new friends and exchanged kisses with a charming resident who was celebrating his birthday. As he was a little drunk, he seemed to be the most romantic man on earth.

I was following the flow of Caraiva's energy and didn't even notice that anxiety had given me a break. I had a few glasses of Neptune, dropped out my forró partner, and ended the night with a new group of friends. When the sun came up, I was laughing and dancing funk on the porch of a group of overjoyed Mineiro friends. For a few seconds, I focused on that sense of freedom. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so free.

Later, walking along the river, after recovering from a hangover with a sea bath, I met the Mineiros again and boarded a boat with them. We were going to celebrate the birthday of my favorite dance partner from the night before. The romantic one.

We started flirting again and I watched myself experience that fragment of happiness. Everything could change with the sunrise, but at that moment I was happy.

Night fell, the blue full moon exploded in the sky and I was sure I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world.

On Easter Sunday, I once again joined the group of new friends for a barbecue and spent the day enjoying the warmth and the swing of the hammock.

I only came back to Trancoso on Monday and I couldn't be more grateful for giving me the chance to reinvent myself and for the effort I was making to be happy again.

8 – THANK YOU VERY MUCH

I had already bought a ticket to Toronto and it was my last day in Trancoso. I remembered the sadness that overwhelmed me when I arrived there 45 days earlier, and I couldn't believe that I had been able to change my mental and emotional state in such a short period of time.

As I picked up my gratitude journal before going to the beach that morning, I realized how much this exercise in looking at the good aspects of my life had made a difference. Unknowingly, I had trained my brain to focus on the positive side of things.

I didn't have a home anymore, but I slept under a roof of one of the most paradisiacal beaches in the country. I had no job, but I gained the freedom to choose a job that would make me happy. I could see something good in every situation and that was unthinkable to that Paula I had once been.

I gave many thanks that morning since my last nights in Trancoso had been truly special.

Clarice, a friend from Curitiba, had booked a B&B to spend the holidays with me, but she had to cancel the plans at the last minute because of her work. Still, she made sure not to cancel the reservation and insisted that I enjoy the stay.

When I came back from Caraiva, I spent my last two nights in a very nice little house, with a very comfortable double bed and a bathroom just for me. There was also a living room, a kitchen, and a huge balcony, surrounded by nature. There was no more room for gratitude in my journal.

My last day in Trancoso dawned bluer than ever. I meditated in my room, ate breakfast, and cycled to the beach. With my journal in hand, I felt tender energy slowly invading me.

I sat on the sand, put on an animated playlist and started writing a new love letter. I was bursting with joy. I looked at everything I had experienced in the last few weeks and felt only love and pride.

> Trancoso, 04/04/2018
>
> Hi.
>
> I am very happy for all that we've lived here in Bahia. Thank you so much for being so strong, for taking care of yourself, for respecting yourself, for allowing yourself, and for loving yourself.
>
> Thank you for understanding your true pain, for letting your old yourself die and for wanting to be born again so

beautifully.

The universe is putting beautiful moments in our path. We will grow together for as long as this journey lasts.

Enjoy the ride, my love. You are amazing and I love you.

After reading my own letter, I dove into the sea and was overwhelmed with a feeling of utter happiness. I cried a lot, but now it was pure joy. I felt for the first time that I was completely connected to the ocean, the sand under my feet, the endless sky my eyes saw, and the gentle wind that shook the coconut palms on the beach. It was inexplicable.

I threw myself into the waves like a child. I threw water up and wept. To anyone looking at the beach, I looked like a madwoman, smiling and dancing in the sea.

I imagined myself arriving in Toronto. I imagined myself flying to Europe across the Atlantic Ocean and back to South America across the Pacific. I didn't know it yet, but it was at that moment that I designed my trip around the world, all I had to do was to take the first step.

I spent the afternoon packing my bags and enjoying the solitude of my luxury bungalow.

To complete the gifts from Bahia, Beto, whom I had called Michel and Pablo in Arraial d'Ajuda, took the road to Trancoso at 10 pm, just to say goodbye to me. He arrived on a motorcycle with his guitar on his back and met me in front of the little Quadrado's[8] church.

I climbed his motorbike, we bought a bottle of white wine and a bag of ice and walked through the sand of Coqueiros Beach. The full moon illuminated the sea while I danced happily with my feet in the sand. In the darkness, the moon shone on the water and on Beto's black eyes. His smile was even more captivating. I told him my desire to go around the world and he encouraged me. We laughed together and he, with his beginner pitch, sang several songs for me. To top it off, I could still invite him to spend the night with me in the super-comfortable bungalow my friend gave me for the weekend.

I couldn't have had a more perfect and beautiful last night.

Beto and I talked a few times during my trip and became good friends. His name, of course, is in my gratitude journal.

9 – THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON

I went back to my mother's house wanting to share with her everything that had changed inside me in Bahia. I thought she would be happy to see that I was no longer suffering, like the day I left for Rio. But the conversation was completely different from what I was expecting.

- Have you decided what you're going to do with the dog? – she asked at the kitchen table while I ate.

Our labrador, Max, stayed with me after the divorce. Felipe said he would share an apartment in Belem with a friend who already had a pet. Besides, taking a labrador to an apartment was not the best idea. During my stay in Bahia, the dog stayed at my mother's house, but this was temporary and she was already bothered.

Out of respect for my mother, I will not give details of that evening's conversation. It was an argument with a lot of yelling, accusations, and unpleasant words. I've heard things no child should hear. And as I was very hurt, I also said things I hope I will never repeat.

I was aware that staying at my mother's house at that moment would not help me. Quietly, I talked to her and ended up moving with Max the next day to my best friend's house. Michelle has done more for me than anyone on earth. To this day, I do not doubt that her friendship is one of the most precious things in my life.

In the days until my departure to Toronto, I packed a much smaller backpack than the two bags I carried to Bahia, and I gave my sister the power of attorney to sign anything on my behalf. Felipe and I still had a house that could be sold while I was gone. And of course, I didn't want anything to oblige me to come back to Brazil before my heart desired.

I had dinner with my closest friends at Michelle's. We drank sparkling wine and I told them some of the beautiful and difficult things I had experienced in Bahia. I received the affection and encouragement from them all. This energy was key to help me overcome my anxiety before embarking on my first destination country.

On the eve of the flight to Canada, I gathered my brothers, brothers-in-law, and nephews for a pizza at my mother's house.

The night with my family was very special. I improvised a speech at the dinner table, but I was so moved that I brought everyone to tears. My mother said beautiful words that gave me back the feeling of warmth lost on the night of our fight.

I boarded to Toronto with the conviction that I was doing the

right thing by giving such a special trip as a gift to the most important person in my life: myself.

10 – OLD REFERENCES

Suelen and her husband were waiting for me at Mississauga Airport. The last snow of Ontario's winter was still covering the pavements, and although it was very cold, I felt warm in my friend's embrace; a friend who genuinely understood me.

Without a doubt, she was one of the most important women in my adult life. We met during an English course I did in New York in 2011. We started talking in the kitchen of the hostel where we were staying and the connection was immediate. It was like a reunion of two souls, after several separate journeys.

Two feminist women, with a very similar way of experiencing life and love. Time was never enough for all the talk we wanted to have. With time, our friendship consolidated and we met again many times in São Paulo, Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, and even in Florida. Whenever one of us had problems, WhatsApp worked as therapy and it was no different when I got divorced.

On the day of my separation, the trip to Canada was the first thing Suelen suggested. But I was afraid to go and lose Felipe forever and I said no. I was afraid of losing what I no longer had.

I had to start the journey slowly. First Rio de Janeiro, then Bahia, and when I knew I no longer wanted the life I had before, I was able to launch myself into another country.

When I arrived in Toronto, I could smile and look at my life with optimism, but I still talked a lot about Felipe and our life together. All my references were stuck in those 14 years of marriage. I couldn't find any different experience to use in my conversations.

- You don't stop talking about him, darling. You find a way to include him in your stories in almost every conversation.

Hearing that from Suelen hurt me deeply, but I recognized that it was true.

You know that friend who is in-love and keeps talking about her new boyfriend? Well, my experience showed me that the brain acts the same way when rejection takes over emotions. The vast majority of people, either men or women, cannot focus on another subject.

Although I had been in zero contact with Felipe for over a month, my mind was still obsessed with the matter. It was pretty hard to admit that after three months, I still wasn't over the end of my marriage. Of course, my ego was offended by Suelen's warning. So, despite defending myself against that accusation, I admitted that it was true. Since I couldn't talk about it with her without crying, I did it through WhatsApp and asked to end the conversation.

11 – FORCE OF NATURE

Among our group of friends were the jokes about mother Suelen's witchcraft and obeah. But the fact is that we all believed in her advice and her obeah sympathies.

A few days after our WhatsApp conversation about Felipe, Suelen offered to give me an herbal bath. With all the love in the world, she prepared water of lavender, sea salt, and other spices, and set a meditation tune to play in the bathroom. After I finished the bath, she came in with her affection potion.

It might have been just water, but I felt the energy she had put into that tea.

Standing inside the tub, facing the tiled wall, I felt her carefully pouring all that scented water over me and holding my hand tightly. Meanwhile, the guided meditation said, "I am a force of nature that cannot be stopped."

Suelen cried and so did I. During that bath I really felt an unstoppable force of nature.

12 – HOW IRONIC

As I lived my days of laughing and confiding with Suelen, I refined my daily meditation and decided to look with more compassion toward myself. I began to understand that every human being on this planet needs their time. I tried harder and harder not to talk about Felipe, and it was in that effort that I became aware of how much I still thought of him.

I started creating a routine of activities in Canada and I was already enrolled for a month of classes at an English school for immigrants. I was determined to keep meditating and exercising. In the beginning, I even offered to help Suelen do a nutritional re-education so that I would also maintain discipline.

Suelen is an extremely humorous person who was responsible for my daily doses of dopamine with the bouts of laughter she caused me. I certainly needed those hormones and she was an expert at giving me the best laughs. We had so much fun following her husband's physical exercise routine, as he is a physical therapist.

With a refined wit to tell any story, Suelen could be both classy and hilarious, talking about the stories of her cousins and their difficult lives as Law students living on the outskirts of Sao Paulo and attending a highly-renowned university in the city.

On my first weekend in Toronto, we bought a bottle of wine and Suelen convinced me to make a Tinder profile.

- How ironic! I'm signing up for an account at the app that helped ruin my marriage, I said.

Slightly drunk, but under my friend's supervision, I gave some likes and went to sleep.

During the week, some profile matches appeared and I started talking with two interesting men. A kind Peruvian with beautiful photos, and a Canadian, of whom I was not convinced by the photos, but who had a very short description that sounded funny to me: "I love to play volleyball".

When I read it, it seemed to me that he was making fun of being on Tinder. As if he was trying to say, "This is a relationship app, do you think I'm here because I like to play volleyball?" Then I discovered that he really meant only that he liked volleyball and was looking for someone with similar interests.

My date with the Peruvian was not as pleasant as our message exchange. Besides being shorter than me, something about his approach didn't convince me. I thanked the beer and unmatched him as soon as I got on the subway back home.

Chatting with the Canadian was more objective and formal, and

that’s why I wasn’t very excited.

13 – RIDICULOUSLY HAPPY

Tall, athletic, a blue in his eyes and a well-trimmed light beard. He was wearing jeans, a navy blue sweatshirt, and a cap that made him look younger. When he hugged me, his perfume just snatched me. I can't even describe his smile. It looked like a Valentine's Day commercial, clear with dimples under the beard.

I don't know if it was my level of English that was low or if I was truly mesmerized because I can't remember the first few sentences he said to me. I kept looking at his bright face staring at me.

"Good thing I came," I thought. That Sunday morning, exactly one week after our first Tinder message exchange, he invited me for coffee, but I was looking for a thousand reasons to cancel the 1 pm appointment at a Starbucks near Suelen's house.

I was overwhelmed with tremendous anxiety. If I had not liked the Peruvian, who had beautiful photos and a much more interesting exchange of messages, I would certainly not like that Canadian, who did not flirt through WhatsApp and didn't look good in the photos.

After asking to delay the date by an hour, I no longer had the nerve to cancel and there I was, completely delighted.

We ordered a black coffee and sat outside. It was sunny and spring had already begun to raise temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere.

Although the school's English test stated that I was almost advanced, I had a hard time understanding what he was saying. Even so, we spent more than 3 hours talking in that cafe.

We were the same age and he had also got divorced in January, although he said very little about his past relationship. Witty, he asked many questions about the reasons that led to the end of my marriage.

- He's gay? Oh dear, I'm so sorry about that, but it's not your fault. Believe me, you are a beautiful woman.

He tried hard to understand everything I said, certainly because I couldn't speak English so well. I liked the attention he gave me when I was expressing myself. He would look into my eyes and mouth and speak slowly so I could follow his reasoning. At one point I was surprised when he took my left hand and joined it with his right hand. "You have long fingers," I said, smiling and returning my hand to the table. I got nervous and even lost my train of thought. He chuckled discreetly.

At the end of the date, we walked to Suelen's building and the farewell was a bit comical. I was hugged in a childlike way, with my body rocking sideways. I got a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the back. I felt a little ridiculous when I walked into the apartment, yet I

wanted to rewind the afternoon and spend all those hours with him again.

We exchanged some messages later that night and we agreed it was a great date. On Monday, he asked me if he could see me again on Friday and Saturday.

- Looks like someone already misses me a lot, – I said, content.

- Yes. That's why I'm asking for Friday and Saturday, – he admitted.

The week went quietly and I walked around the city listening to the Beatles, ridiculously happy. I struggled to put myself in the present, feel the temperature, watch the streets, the people on the subway, and the yellow tulips that graced the entrances of the mirrored buildings. I was proud to have made that happen and to be studying English in Canada. I want to go back in time when I remember that feeling of success. It was truly amazing to live, for the first time in years, what my heart was asking for.

14 – MY BLUE PICTURE

Finally, it was Friday and our date began with a half-hour delay. We both arrived on time, but we were waiting in different places. He said he would be late, but he arrived early and stayed inside the bar. I thought I was early and stayed outside.

After the disappointment and the attempt to explain what had happened, we had two beers and got to know each other a little better. Although winter was officially over, it was very cold that night.

He told me he was tired and asked for the bill. In the meantime, I was trying to understand how Canadian dates worked. I didn't know what the next step would be, and I wondered if it was just that: two beers and a parting. How could all this seem so natural to him and so unpredictable to me?

As we walked down the bar stairs, he pulled my arm and stole a kiss from me. We were surprised when the kitchen door opened above us, pressing us against the wall. We heard the noise of an aluminum tray falling and we left laughing at the poor waiter who could not imagine what was blocking the door.

We walked a block and he stopped me at the corner, where the street was emptier, for a longer kiss. The light from the light post illuminated a very fine drizzle that hardly wet us.

Very kindly, Jordan chose the locations of our dates always near where I was staying.

We walked to Suelen's building and chatted a little longer in the lobby of the building, near the fireplace, where other kisses warmed up that chilly night a little more. With his arms inside my huge black jacket, he said he would like to take me to his house. I still didn't understand that date, because a few minutes earlier, at the bar table, I had the impression that he was rushing things off to get rid of me.

- Honey, you said you were tired. So I suppose you should go to your house alone and rest. We'll see each other tomorrow," I said, anticipating the farewell.

The next day, punctually at 10 am, the two-seater car parked in front of the concierge. With his cap back and sunglasses, Jordan smiled excitedly introducing me to our "carrinho",[9] as he said in Portuguese in a heavy accent.

It was a beautiful sunny day and he scheduled a tour of Toronto's traditional neighborhoods. We walked the streets of Kensington Market, observing the street sellers and dozens of stylish cafés. Then he took some pictures of me on the graffiti walls of Graffiti Alley, where he also picked a white flower for me and invited me to his house.

In a very quiet street, we entered a small green house with a small garden in the front yard. There were no colorful flowers like the neighbors', but neither was it overgrown.

The floor creaked as I stopped to take off my shoes, and I smelled the wooden door made of rubble he designed himself and that divided the living room from the kitchen. Jordan was an architect. The coffee table, also made by him, caught my eye: a bicycle wheel on a tripod held the round glass top.

We drank a glass of wine and exchanged several musical references sitting on the living room sofa. He introduced me to videos of his favorite Canadian bands and I showed him some Brazilian music. Of course, the samba and funk classics were in my multicultural repertoire.

When he asked me to teach him how to dance forró, I realized that this was just an excuse for feeling my body closer to his. Even so, it was funny to see him all awkward trying to keep up with my steps.

Awkward as in the goodbye hug we shared after breakfast, he took off my coat, laid me on the couch, and stared at me as if waiting for permission before taking the next step. He looked like a teenager.

I felt insecure and asked myself if I wanted to be there. The answer came immediately. I then held his face in both hands and kissed him as intensely as I could and he asked me to his bedroom. Jordan loved me as sweet as no one had ever had.

The next morning he drove me to Scarborough Bluffs and I was speechless before the sloping cliffs over the unutterable blue of Lake Ontario. We held each other for a long time, watching that vastness of water. I focused all my attention on where our bodies touched. A cold wind was blowing, and I felt that embrace was the only place in the world I'd rather be. In my imagination, that moment turned into a blue picture.

When the car was a block from home, he put his hand on my leg and asked me not to leave. At that time, I thought he didn't want to take me home, but then I wondered if the request was for me not to leave Toronto. We had just met and everything had been amazing. I'll never know.

15 – UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOR

One night in an online chat, I said I was searching cities to see in Europe and Jordan wanted to know if I already had my airline ticket to the next destination. We had been seeing each other for a month now and the meetings were getting more and more frequent.

I didn't have any tickets yet, but I said I did. And that changed things between us completely.

I knew why I was lying very well, but it took me a while to realize that was the trigger that drove him away from me. Only when I began revisiting my notes from that period I could realize my expectations were built on my own view of the world, on my previous experiences.

Rejected, I expected him to ask me to stay. But that's not what happened.

When I realized that, I also understood that we don't always understand what the other says exactly. All the information that comes to us also goes through our filter. So when he didn't say what I expected to hear from him, I felt even more rejected. In fact, he said nothing and I understood his silence as indifference.

From that moment on, the relationship changed completely. Jordan no longer texted so often and we began to see each other less.

Every time we were together, everything was magic. I could tell by the way he looked at me and touched me that he really wanted to be with me, but I couldn't understand the reason why he would just disappear the next day, making me feel really rejected and anxious.

I kept disguising my anxiety until I finally bought a ticket to Scotland.

On the other hand, believing that my trip was already sorted since weeks ago, Jordan kept trying not to get attached. I'm not sure, but maybe he didn't want to show that what we had was nothing more than an affair without any commitment either, because I seemed to be living my life without including him in my travel plans.

I understood his distance based on my rejection beliefs and hid myself behind a "I don't want to commit myself to anyone either" mask. Meanwhile, maybe Jordan was just trying to protect himself.

By playing that ridiculous little game, trying to make myself look all independent and detached, I pushed him away completely.

16 – CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

When my English course finished, I started working as a waitress at some events around the city, which kept me busy and active, and I secured a few dollars. I also made an appointment with a coach to see me online and help me discover my purpose. I knew that after that trip I'd like to work on something that I was passionate about. And I was no longer sure if journalism was that job.

I was working hard on building myself as a new woman and I was really willing to invest in her.

A few days before my birthday, I met Jordan again and the connection between us was absolute. When we said goodbye that morning, we had a long conversation without saying a word. We just stared at each other and smiled, swapping soft kisses on our arms, hands and neck. When I said goodbye, I silently thanked him for everything being well between us and got a message from him as soon as I came home. "Thank you for the lovely night. As usual, time flies when we are together." After that, he disappeared again for several days.

I'd already mentioned I intended to celebrate my birthday in Montreal. After all, since Jordan showed no interest in seeing me, I wanted to have something very interesting scheduled for the most special day of my life.

During the week Jordan asked me how things were in Montreal, and I said I hadn't traveled yet. Disappointed, he regretted not having spoken to me before, as he wished I had been with him on a visit to a friend. I just wondered why the hell we wouldn't ask each other things.

Arriving in Montreal, I stayed at a gentleman's house, who was too grumpy, and at the same time too affectionate, for the local culture. This was my first Couchsurfing experience and a girl from Uzbekistan shared the host room with me. She invited me to a Bachata class, a sensual Dominican dance much appreciated in Canada.

On my birthday's night, I joined a group of travelers I met on the Couchsurfing website and visited Mount Royal and Saint Joseph's Church. We had dinner at a restaurant that is specialized in Poutine, traditional dish made of french fries with cheese and barbecue sauce, and ended the night at a very sweet and polite Canadian guy's home who was hosting three boys; one from France, one from Sweden and one from Russia. A Chinese and a Swedish girls were also in the group and I heard "Happy Birthday" in many different languages.

Although I was confused by everything that was happening, or rather, by everything that wasn't happening between Jordan and me, I had incredible days in Montreal and I was charmed by Ottawa, the capital of Canada. Even though I spent only a few hours in the city.

I went back to Toronto determined to accept that my romance with Jordan was what it looked like: a brief relationship. I did my best to accept that I would no longer see my Canadian guy and made a supernatural effort not to send him any more messages.

17 – WHAT IS OBVIOUS HAS TO BE SAID

A few days before my departure, I got in touch with Jordan with the excuse I wanted to rent a mini car to go around with a friend of mine, a Brazilian girl, who was in Toronto. He complained about the formality in my message and I finally decided to open up.

I explained that I didn't understand why he had been distant. I said that I felt rejected and then I also kept my distance trying to protect myself. That's when he finally reached out to me.

He used the expression "you are running away," literally.

- You are running away and I'm just trying not to get attached – he wrote.

- You never explained that to me. When we meet everything is perfect, but then you go away and I feel rejected – I opened up.

- Please, forgive me, I didn't mean to make you feel rejected. I was only trying to keep some safe distance because you're leaving me – His words made me feel relieved but pissed off at the same time. Why the hell didn't we have that conversation before? Now my trip is already sorted.

- I'm leaving in three days and I wanna see you – I wrote, straight to the point.

- I wanna see you too – Jordan confessed.

Suelen, owner of a self-esteem and self-confidence that only Beyoncé has, had tried to convince me of the what was obvious several times, but I kept seeing things based on my previous experiences. I couldn't see things with any rationality. I hadn't realized I was totally emotional most of the time.

We met on the subway on a Saturday afternoon. It had been almost 10 days since we had seen each other and I had even forgotten how handsome he was. I was very happy to see him, but I thought it might not be a good idea to meet him so close to the trip to Europe. Why mess up my feelings even more with short time left to cross the ocean?

It was stronger than I.

As usual, Jordan was creative at the meeting and took me for a walk to a small festival on the streets of a residential neighborhood.

Food stalls, local artists exhibit, children's recreation and various performances by buskers. After some coffee to warm us up, while we were taking a look at an artist's stall, he grabbed my hand and pulled me onto a more deserted street that was behind the fair. I had already

understood that Canadians are more reserved when it comes to showing affection.

The last time I'd sneaked to kiss someone, I was in sixth grade. He smiled and hugged me bringing his body and his lips close to me. Once again, his gaze at that moment assured me that all was well again. Everything was fine as it always had been. Time stopped again and we kissed. He may not have noticed, but my voice trembled as I uttered I missed him in the last few weeks.

After that, I was attracted by the sound of a harmonica and we went into a bar where a Japanese guy in a blue kimono performed with a local jazz band. That was one of the most interesting musical performances I've ever seen.

After almost an hour watching the Japanese performance, we took the shuttle home. On the bus, he held my hand and squeezed it tightly. He seemed to want to keep the touch of my skin in his memory. I stared at him infinitely. I wanted to picture his smile in my mind forever and I succeeded. Those seconds are still alive in my mind and I can "press the play button" of my memory at any moment.

18 – FAREWELL WITHOUT A GOODBYE

I found Jordan's invitation to go to a church a little unusual, but I had been trying hard not to judge people since a few months ago.

When we reached the corner, after leaving an unorthodox cult, he interrupted me when I was speaking and made me hurry.

- This is the train – he told me opening the VLT door.

In a hurry, he directed me into the vehicle and stood outside when the door closed. I understood nothing at all and only managed to cry as he smiled from the sidewalk and waved at me. I wanted to say goodbye, I wanted to say so many things. It was so unexpected and violent for me that I cried. I cried so much I felt tears streaming down my neck and wetting my lap.

He texted me immediately saying that someone had honked at us at my boarding time. I didn't pay attention and just asked why he didn't say goodbye.

- We don't need to say goodbye, if we'll see each other again.

I wanted to believe that was true, but my mind only believed I was being rejected once again.

I arrived at Suelen's apartment with an ocean of feelings trapped in my chest. She asked how the meeting was, but realized I wasn't ready to talk. Using her natural and tender sensitivity, she allowed me to be silent.

I grabbed the laptop and started dumping the words on the keyboard. The more I wrote, the more I cried. Suelen seemed to hug me from afar while she was in the kitchen. As a wise old woman, even without looking at me, she could understand everything I felt.

When I finished the text, I closed the computer and we both looked at each other. I took a deep breath, dried my tears, and showed her my text.

After, I sent that letter to the correct address: Jordan's.

I was leaving for Scotland, I had nothing to lose by saying everything I felt. Besides, I knew nothing would change my plans that moment. I just wanted to let him know what that uncommitted relationship provoked in me.

Jordan didn't answer it.

19 – SELF-ESTEEM AND EMPTINESS

One day before I left Canada, I went to Lake Ontario shores, near the port where the ships leave for Toronto Island. I'd meet two friends there, but I arrived a few hours earlier.

I cried watching the ducks glide through the freezing water and decided to break the silence with Felipe after three months. I went to a coffee shop and made a voice call. He didn't know that I had decided to travel without a destination yet. He certainly believed I would be in Toronto for a few months and maybe I'd try the immigration process.

We had a very nice and mature conversation. I told him about my plan to travel the world and said I'd like him to know that from me. I could tell by his voice that he was being sincere when he wished me a safe trip.

- I thought you could go on a trip like this, Paula. This has a lot to do with you and your free spirit. You know I'd never do something like that and I admire your courage a lot – Felipe said tenderly and honestly.

We talked about forgiveness and I was thrilled to say that I had finally managed to look at him as another human being, trying to be happy. He also cried and thanked me for unblocking his number and talking to him.

- I care about you, Paula. You can always count on me – he said after asking me to be careful.

The next day, Suelen and I had a conversation about self-confidence a few hours before my flight.

I told her that my mind was trying hard to convince me that Jordan had just had fun with me. That he treated me well just to make sure I'd said yes when he invited me to the next meeting.

My brain was trained to think no one could like me. It made me believe everyone would get bored and leave me at some point. So I'd act in a way to make this happen, reinforcing the belief that my fate was to be rejected, always.

She tried to convince me once again that this theory didn't seem to apply to Jordan.

– Paula, you are beautiful, smart and fun. Why wouldn't he like you? Instead, I'd be saying to myself "I'm so amazing and the boy is so into me that he's scared of getting too attached".

Rationally, I could understand that, but that wasn't how I felt. Nevertheless, at that moment, I made a deal with her, and especially

with myself, to change these beliefs and work on my self-esteem.

Suelen and I hugged each other in the elevator and we both cried. We were interrupted by a neighbor who entered before we got to the ground floor. I couldn't be more grateful for those two months of support and love, for all the impactful conversations we had, for the delicious laughs and especially for the honesty and warmth.

I got into the Uber car and kept her words with me:

- I can't imagine anything bad happening to you. I'm really sure you will have a beautiful trip.

A week after I landed in Scotland, our friendship began to crumble and this is the biggest emptiness Toronto has given me.

20 – IF I HAD REACHED REAL PEACE

I crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the night of June 28, 2018. After a long and tiring connection in Halifax, the plane finally took off for Europe. I smiled at the full moon watching me through the white window and fell asleep quickly. As the sunlight began to color the sky pink and lilac, I spotted Scotland rock formations bathed by the sea and heard my heart say: this is happening. Your dream is coming true right now.

Stephen, my second Couchsurfing host, had sent me his home address the night before and told me he'd be at work when I arrived, but the door would be open.

We texted each other and he apologized for not accommodating me directly in the room, as the two German guests would leave the house only in the afternoon. I told him not to worry, after all I was so tired I'd pass out on the first couch I found on my way.

When I got into the living room, I had a big surprise. Stephen had left a bed ready on the floor. I threw myself on that inflatable mattress with clean and comfortable sheets, I was truly thankful. I mentally thanked him a hundred times. I took a warm shower that felt like a welcoming hug and then I fell asleep.

I woke up a few hours later, walked through the neighborhood, and bought some stuff to prepare dinner to thank my host. Stephen was already home when I arrived from the market.

I couldn't really understand the English he spoke because the Scottish accent was something completely new to my ears. Still, we had a great conversation about ego traps, forgiveness and also about gratitude.

We had some wine and listened to some vinyl records before bed.

The next morning, I made omelets and we sunbathed in the yard.

Stephen had a date with a girl he met on Tinder and I went for a walk in Glasgow downtown.

After struggling a little, I could understand how public transportation worked in the city. I took a train from the suburbs and found it strange not having to pay to board. Arriving at the central station I found out I was supposed to buy a ticket in order to leave the terminal. I spent more money than I needed and bought a return ticket, just because I couldn't understand what people were saying.

I saw many Scots sunbathing on George Square's grass. Winter is really bad in northern Europe, so people who live there make the most of the sun. I laid on the floor pretending to be one of them and watched the sky as I felt my skin burn. Hearing the noises of the city, I felt sorry for myself for having that anxiety feeling stuck in my chest. I

was making a big dream come true, but, at the same time, I hadn't found any sense in the madness of carrying a backpack with no final destination.

It would've been perfect, if I had reached real peace.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes and wished I had gotten some tranquility, but that sick feeling in my stomach and my fast heartbeat would still follow me for many months.

I walked on the streets of Merchant City, had a cheap hamburger for lunch, and ended up in a pub where a kind of Scottish dance class was taking place. I joined the people and tried to learn the dance. I had a very fun afternoon at the sound of the bagpipe and swirling around with strangers whose accent I didn't understand.

The next day I went for a walk in Kelvingrove Park. I watched the young people having some barbecue and picnic under the trees and I stopped at a coffee shop to use the wifi. I read that Edinburgh was a small town and that I could visit everything in just a day. I bought a bus ticket for the next day.

In the morning, Stephen took me to the bus station and said goodbye with a request: "If you go to a church, get in and say a prayer for me. This is the best way to thank me." He also said he was inspired to start writing his own gratitude journal and I got on the bus proud of myself for traveling to another destination all alone.

21 – BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND TEARS

I put the large backpack in a locker at the Edinburgh bus station and headed straight towards the main street of the historic center where a free guided tour would start. I began to better understand the Scottish accent of the tour guide and I can say that I understood 40% of his explanations, which for me was a victory.

Whenever I got a wifi connection, I googled some of the historical facts that had caught my attention.

Edinburgh is like a fairytale city. The castle, at its highest spot, seems to look around at all the medieval buildings that stand the test of time. Cobblestone streets, colorful flowers on the facades, and the sound of bagpipes completed the magical scene before my eyes.

After the tour, I stopped at a Starbucks and made a video call with my family. It was Sunday and my brothers were at my mother's house for lunch. I saw my nephews, I told them a little about Scotland, and felt that my mother was proud of me.

I spent a few hours watching a group of nearby Indian tourists discussing something that was beyond my understanding and walked through a beautiful park at dusk.

I left for Dundee with no battery on my cell phone, but, luckily, a Brazilian I met over the internet, who has lived in Scotland for years, was already waiting for me at the bus station. I felt an immediate connection with Johanna. A sweet and energetic woman who gave her own room away for me to spend the next few nights.

We took lovely walks around Dundee as well as Saint Andrews, the city where royals go to college. We had a lot in common and we talked a lot. And our time together was a mixture of laughters and tears.

I spent four nights at Johanna's house, and on the eve of my departure, we got drunk on white wine at a pub. Laughing like two wasted teenagers, we asked her daughter to rescue us, since neither of us could drive.

I was on a hangover when I got on the bus back to Glasgow, from where my flight to England would depart, and I traveled happily for making a new friend in Scotland.

22 – A NEARLY GENIUS IDEA

I was looking forward to meeting my new host's space and living the incredible experience of staying in a stranger's houseboat in England. I even imagined telling this story to my daughter one day, only in a completely different way.

Gary was extremely kind offering to pick me up at the airport. It was a nearly one-hour drive to the park where the boat was moored in the suburbs of London. He parked and warned me that it was about a 15-minute walk to the canal where he lived.

It was after midnight and I had no idea where I was. The park was completely dark and I saw absolutely nothing but endless black shadow before my eyes. Carrying my two backpacks, I walked blindly listening to the footsteps of that complete stranger beside me.

I started to panic and think of the stupidity I had done. I wouldn't even survive to tell the tale. Who knows if anyone would find my body?

That man told me we were walking through a park, but it could very well be a football field or an abandoned cemetery. There was a scary silence and I had never seen him in my life, how could I trust him?

I tried to reassure myself that everything was fine. I had read all his references on Couchsurfing and also sent my group of friends a picture of him along with his address, phone number, Facebook profile, and his professional website: spiritual hairdresser.

I was alone, with a stranger and in the middle of nowhere. Completely vulnerable. He could do anything to me. I had nowhere to run since I had no idea what was around me. In that absolute darkness, I could only keep walking. "So much for an adventuresome spirit."

When the bad thoughts came back, full of macabre scenes, I would tell myself that he was just a hippie fellow who lived in a boathouse and cut people's hair chanting mantras with lit incense.

At some point in the walk, I could not stand the anxiety and broke the silence.

- I confess I'm a little afraid of being here in this darkness, in a place I have no idea where it is. I hope I can trust you, because that's my only alternative now. – I tried to sound relaxed.

- I was thinking about how you might be feeling right now, – he laughed. – Don't worry, it's not the best time for you to arrive, but you're safe. I promise.

At his words, I managed to calm down and remember that my phone had a flashlight. I was relieved to see the ground under my feet

and a small path ahead of me.

We reached the houseboat and it was very hot in there. The iron roof had been in the sun all day and it turned the place into a greenhouse. Fortunately, he was not a psychopath and the boat was full of colorful paintings, representing the seven chakras.

I would sleep on the living room couch and he'd sleep in the small bedroom. Vegan, Gary prepared some braised vegetables and showed me how the bathroom worked. That's when I realized that the adventure of staying in a houseboat was not that much fun.

- A pump pulls water from the canal into the shower and taps. The toilet is ready if you want to do number 1. The urine goes to a reservoir outside the boat. To make the number 2, simply activate this lever that opens the bottom of the latrine where the feces will be deposited in a bucket with soil. Once you're done, you just need to throw some more dirt over it to avoid the stench. Don't worry about removing anything from the bucket or reservoir. I do it later in the day and bury it. I prefer to do my needs in nature. So feel free to do the same if you want.

I thanked him for the explanation trying to sound natural. But inside I was screaming, "What did you say? I'll poop on a bucket and let you clean it? No way, buddy! No one puts their hands on my poop."

Using nature seemed a more reasonable option, but I wondered how embarrassing it was to ask him the best place to shit in privacy. It was a bad idea to stay in a houseboat.

My daughter, if you are born and read Mom's book, pay attention: if you ever have the opportunity to do something like this, make sure that the toilet works before you accept it.

I lay in bed determined to change accommodation the next day. I didn't want him to think I didn't like the house, but that green life was too radical for me. It was hard, but I accepted that there was nothing wrong with me for not wanting to adapt to that lifestyle. Maybe after visiting Asia, I could face it more easily. At that moment, I wasn't ready yet.

We had breakfast on the small porch of the boat and I went for a walk in the park and around the neighborhood while looking for a place with wifi to plan how I would get out of the houseboat. I didn't find a coffee shop nearby and went back to the boat, where I texted the mother of a Brazilian friend who lived in London. She had already offered me accommodation in exchange for some money, but the amount she asked me was twice what a hostel would. So I decided to negotiate and got a couch in the living room for 10 pounds a day. It was still more expensive than a hostel, but I would have breakfast so I decided to accept it.

I told my host that I had decided to accept the accommodation of a friend who lived in the city because I would spend a lot of money on transportation to get around every day, which was true. The train from his city cost eight pounds, it made no sense for me to stay on the outskirts of London if I wanted to see the sights.

Extremely kind, he understood and led me to the station. Arriving at Mari's house, I thanked myself, as I was beginning to learn that I didn't have to be in an awkward situation for fear of what others might think. Gary's life did not change because I only stayed there for a night. He continued to live in his houseboat, being vegan, doing his spiritual haircuts, and using nature to pee and poop. But my life just got a little better, not worrying about someone burying my poop at the end of the day.

23 – THROUGH MAZES AND BRIDGES

On the first night, my new hostess took me to a very Brazilian bar to watch a Brazilian soccer match of the World Cup. Brazil lost, but I gained a cozy night within the culture of my country.

Mari left before me and, after a few beers, I put the address she gave me on Google Maps before leaving the bar. I had no idea which bus to take, so I decided to take the 40-minute-walk shown in the app.

I walked for more than 2 hours alone in the middle of the night but felt completely safe. When I reached the location shown on the map, I realized I had no idea where I was. I walked around the block to try to remember the building facade or some business, but I couldn't recognize anything there.

I walked into a bar and used wifi to tell Mari that I was lost, but since it was the middle of the night, I didn't know if she would see my text. I walked again, and at times I felt that I was near her apartment, but the truth was I was lost.

I decided to go back to the point where the map had first sent me and I found two British women talking in front of a building staircase. I asked one of them to call my hostess. I was too embarrassed to have to wake her in the middle of the night to help the drunk guest, but I had no choice. That was it or sleeping on the street.

Mari and her boyfriend picked me up about five blocks from the correct address and she couldn't understand how I got there. So I showed the message that she herself sent me on WhatsApp. We never found out where she got that address from, but what matters is that, after almost 3 hours lost in the early hours of London, I got to my couch safely and very grateful to have been rescued.

For the past three days, I went sightseeing around the city.

On Sunday, while trying to find the National Gallery, I ended up in the heart of the Pride Parade. Many streets downtown were blocked and I spent practically all day trying to find a way to get to the museum. In an attempt to dodge the crowd, I ended up at Buckingham Palace, which was on my visiting plans for the next day.

The most logical thing to do, since I didn't do any planning, would be to give up the museum and look for another sight. But I remembered that museums usually close on Mondays and the National Gallery was one of the places I didn't want to miss. So I decided to take on the task of finding the way to the gallery. The plan was to enjoy the Pride Parade and have fun in the process.

I went in and out of several streets, tried to skip gates. I was almost overwhelmed by a crowd of gay men in multicolored, glittery clothes. I danced to relax a bit and tried to find new ways out of the

Parade again. After almost 5 hours, I finally found the entrance line to the museum and, upon entering that gigantic building, I just sat in one of the rooms for over 40 minutes.

After visiting some permanent exhibitions, I faced the end of the Pride Parade and crossed the Westminster Bridge, walking. I stood there for a few minutes against the wall and watched a gathering of Asian tourists photographing the world's most famous clock. Big Ben had been under renovation since 2017, and even though it was covered by an iron structure, the Chinese used all sorts of photographic equipment to capture an image.

I ended the day walking around the London Eye, and when I gave up looking for some cheap dinner, I returned to my hostess's apartment hoping to find some fruit on the table.

I was very lucky because that night her boyfriend decided to hit the pots and we were surprised with delicious pasta with Carbonara sauce. We had some wine, talked about the difficulties of living in another country and I went to bed early.

The next morning I met Ana, my hostess's daughter, whom I knew from Brazil. She went to my wedding while still dating a friend of Felipe.

London, like the rest of Europe, lived the hottest days of summer, and that morning we lay by a lake in Hyde Park and sunbathed. I told the story of my divorce without feeling hurt, but it was still uncomfortable to relive those memories.

After Ana left, I walked a little more through the park trying to understand the feelings that conversation caused me. I was anxious, I could not enjoy the present on its fullest, and my mind kept shifting from the pains of the past and the fear of the future.

I lay on the lawn, taking advantage of the shade of a tree to try to meditate. I spent a few minutes listening to the sounds around. Was I where I wanted to be? That question came to me like a blow and I remembered 2015 when I had the tickets bought to fly from Paris to London, but the second abortion interrupted my plans.

I wish I had spent my 34th birthday in England during my first trip to Europe. At the time, our traveling plans also included Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. I was with Felipe, but an emergency curettage in Paris forced us to give up London and go straight to Amsterdam.

It was then that I accepted that I was exactly where I should be. I needed to experience London under my own lens and finally realized what a huge gift I had in my hands. "I can do whatever I want here. By the way, I can do only what I want. I'm going to skip military museums and I don't have to push anyone to visit modern art galleries. I can stop as often as I want to hear the talented buskers

performing around the city. I can just sit in a café and watch people, as I've always liked to do. This trip is just mine and it's beautiful."

I got up enthusiastically and decided to go back to the London Eye. I crossed one of the pedestrian bridges and lost track of time dancing to the sound of a musician playing Rihanna's and Ed Sheeran's hits in a sort of rhythmical drum. I can't tell what that instrument was, but I threw a few coins and let myself go with the melody, not worrying about the judgment of the tourists passing by me. After three or four songs, I continued on my way to the other side of the river, where I could see the Ferris-wheel light up at dusk.

A pink light came over the city and I cried with gratitude. Of course, that was where I wanted to be.

24 – REALITY CHECK

I chose the third day to do my music tour. Amy Winehouse and Beatles are from England and, obviously, this was one of the reasons I was in London.

After appreciating Camden Market's crafts, I went for a beer at the pub where Amy used to get drunk with her friends. I also passed the house where she lived and walked a few more miles through the quiet streets of the city until I reached Abbey Road, the world's most iconic crosswalk, perpetuated on the cover of the 12th Beatles album. I had no one to take the album photo with me, so I improvised a selfie by leaning the phone on the curb and using the self-timer.

On the fourth and last day, I visited St. Paul's Cathedral and went to the Tower Bridge. Two Spanish guys offered to take a picture of me as I stopped by the river, a few feet from the bridge. One of them made conversation asking where I was from, how long I was traveling and if I was alone. We talked for a few minutes and he said they would end the day at a nearby pub. I thanked him, but my bus to Liverpool was leaving in a few hours.

After saying goodbye, I walked away and laughed at the awkward crush I felt for that Spanish man. Then it hit me like a truck. I realized I was traveling around the world and I was single. Do you know that bomb that explodes in your mind? Yeah. I laughed again, but now at myself.

It was obvious that I still didn't realize the extent of my freedom. I could return the flirt if I wanted to without feeling guilty. I remembered Jordan and thanked him for the good times he had given me in Toronto, but finally, it was time to leave the past behind.

I had several months and several destinations ahead. Why not enjoy the possibilities life would offer me? Discovering that I was single in Europe gave me a different mood to continue the trip.

25 – ALL BUT A MEMORY

I arrived in little Liverpool at dawn and went straight to the hostel, where I fell asleep on the reception couch, because I didn't want to pay for an extra night just to be able to check in 7 hours in advance. When the day dawned, I left my backpack there and went out for a walk and to look for some cheap food. I wanted some whole grain bread, omelet, fruit and cereal, but my budget wouldn't allow me certain luxuries, especially when I was paying the bill in sterling. I thanked them for the croissant with black coffee and headed my way.

Liverpool is very small. I walked to the Anglican Cathedral, the largest one in Europe, but found the church closed. The whole city was decorated for the University of Liverpool graduation party, and some ceremonies were held in the two main churches, the Catholic and the Anglican.

I walked to the Catholic cathedral, intentionally built facing the Anglican one, but a few blocks away. I attended the end of a Commencement, not understanding a word of what the priest was saying, and then walked into the city center. I bought a salad for lunch and went to the hostel to check in.

When I left Cavern Club, I stopped at a bar to catch up on the last moments of Croatia and England match. Regardless of the outcome, the English would get wasted.

The next day, I met my Couchsurfing hostess in Queen Victoria's square and went to my new accommodation. An almost unfurnished apartment in the heart of Liverpool, inhabited by two Polish students.

We had wine, talked about art, and shared videos and photos of our favorite artists. Paulina was an architecture student, but worked in a gallery.

I slept on a mattress in the living room, and the next day I made one of the worst pancakes I ever made to thank for the accommodation.

I left for the last day out in Liverpool and, reaching the Mersey River shores, home to the statues of the four Beatles, I remembered planning to get Liverpool on my road map. When I started traveling, I had no idea where I was going, but I had a few cities in mind and Liverpool was one of the places I'd definitely visit.

I felt so grateful that I couldn't explain it. I asked a tourist to take some pictures of me among the sculptor Andy Edwards monument and then I sat on the floor, feeling all the excitement of that moment. "Everything passes by and this will be all but a memory soon."

A chilly wind blew the leaves away, and I could smell popcorn coming from a trolley on Pier Head. This was the moment of a dream

come true, and I wanted to remember all the emotions I was feeling. “Dream. Dream and act. Anything is possible,” I told myself.

26 – THE IRISH BLUE EYES

Exhausted but happy, I arrived at Dublin bus station around 7 am on a Saturday morning. I spent the night traveling on a huge ferry that crossed the Irish Sea. During the night, I exchanged some messages with my host on WhatsApp. He was already apologizing: "I'm in a pub and I'll probably be still awake and drunk when you arrive."

I said I understood that it was Friday night and that he, as a good Irish, was enjoying one of the hottest summers in European history.

Despite being drunk, he was very kind having me in his house. I'd sleep on the living room sofa, which was filthy, just like the rest of the place. I kept thinking that dirt could be something cultural and that, since hosting was free, I should accept it without complaining. I took a quick shower, trying not to touch the moldy shower stall, and lay down wrapped in the duvet, as he had given me no sheets or pillows.

I slept for about 3 hours and then went for a walk around the city. When I returned at night, he was still drunk and this time he had company. He and his friend were right on the couch that was supposed to be my bed. At the coffee table, I could see all kinds of drugs.

He didn't hint at anything, but of course I felt insecure. I didn't know how many kinds of drugs and how much alcohol he could've mixed by then and I started looking for a hostel right away. Noticing that I was apprehensive, he offered me the guest room he used to rent for Airbnb. I locked the door and decided to leave the next day.

Sunday dawned rainy and I, holding my backpack already, said goodbye to the host, who was watching TV in his underwear in the middle of the room. I stopped at a coffee shop and wondered about the possibilities I had. I sent emergency requests to other hosts on Couchsurfing and checked the prices and locations of available hostels. As it was raining, I spent a few hours waiting for someone from the platform to accept my request, but it was in vain. I went to the cheapest hostel I found near the city center.

I laid in bed right after having a shower and eating some ready-made salad I had bought at the grocery store. The room smelled of smelly feet and there was a gentleman in his underpants on the bed near the window. Nothing much different from the last Couchsurfing, I thought. But I felt much safer and was happy about it. I was so glad that I jumped right out of bed and decided to go out to celebrate.

I wore a denim shirt over my pajama top, put on some makeup on my eyes, and went for a walk alone and aimlessly. France had just won the Cup, but I remember seeing a lot of people wearing the defeated Croatia top in the crowded pubs. When I heard an excited

crowd singing “Take me home, country roads,” I knew I had found my pub. I grabbed some cider and started singing along. It felt like a college party surrounded by old friends.

The band played John Denver once again, but at the height of the singing, the microphones were turned off. General frustration. The doors of my pub closed earlier than I expected and I found myself once again standing in front of Dublin’s most iconic place: the Temple Bar. I had already taken my picture on the flowered, lighted façade in the previous afternoon, but something invited me in again.

I ignored my intuition and continued walking down the cobblestone street, wet by the light drizzle that was still falling. I was trying to convince myself it was time to go to bed, but I looked at the clock and decided to go back. When I remember this moment, I always think of what they call universal consciousness. I can’t explain, but something really called me to Temple Bar that night.

Intuition? Fate? Luck? I don’t know.

The place was crowded, as one would expect from Ireland’s most famous place. The pub I was at had many rooms, starting with a space without tables or chairs, such as a lobby with a bar on the opposite wall. The rustic walls, with the centuries-old bricks on display, had paintings and signs bearing the oldest Guinness logos.

Yes, I talk about Guinness a lot in this chapter, because it’s one of the most famous beers in the world and it was born there. The factory is also a tourist attraction in the Irish capital.

In the second room, the most crowded one, there was a small stage where duos or trios would perform nonstop. The bar never closes. Above the stage there was a luminous panel showing the last record of the house: 114 hours of live guitar from June 12 to 17, 2011.

I grabbed my Guinness and stood by the counter, enjoying the night musicians. Some drunk guys came to ask my name, but drunk people’s accent is even harder to understand in northern Europe. Scotland and Ireland were a challenge to my communication.

I moved when I grabbed my second glass of beer and looked around the other side of the room. I was mesmerized when I saw those blue eyes smiling. Before crossing the room, he was practically by my side, but I hadn’t noticed it.

Thick eyebrows and flushed cheeks with very short medium-brown hair. His full beard, mixed with brown, red and gray strands, was almost an unnecessary charm, but what fascinated me were the eyes. Round and black-lashed, they wrinkled beautifully on the side as he smiled. The blue was so crystal clear that it looked like two shining Christmas lamps. The white shirt with the sleeves folded showed

strong forearms and hands.

Along with him there was another tall bearded man and a gorgeous blonde in a tight red dress. I wondered what chances the ponytail girl who came out of the hostel wearing pink pajamas under her jeans might have.

The friend who was with him kept looking at me and my mind created the most obvious situation: the most charming smile of the night could only be “the statuesque blonde dressed to kill” boyfriend. While his friend, who didn’t interest me, should be thinking that I was corresponding to his looks.

I had already learned not to flirt with committed guys, but I just couldn’t stop looking at him. It was magnetic. When I realized that I was looking toward him again, I would look away to see if his friend or girlfriend had noticed and stumble across his friend looking at me. He tried to disguise it but, with a peripheral gaze, I saw them commenting on something.

When I found myself trapped between a German and a Swedish trying to explain something to me about the best beers in Europe, the gorgeous blonde excused herself from the drunk boys and pulled me by the hand.

- Come on, my friend wants to know you – she ordered, while I just thought that the guy who didn’t interest me really thought I was looking at him.

What an awkward situation. The blonde trying to help her friend and me interested in her boyfriend. When I was thinking of an excuse to return to the nonsense conversation between the German and the Swedish, she surprised me by pointing at that handsome man and saying he was her friend Conor. “And this is Mike, my boyfriend,” she said, hugging the tallest and dull guy.

I don’t know if anyone noticed, but I must have had the brightest smile in all of Europe because I couldn’t really believe it.

- You play hard, huh? I tried to pay for your beer, but you didn’t even move. He told me. “I don’t accept beers from handsome men when I’m wearing pajamas under my clothes,” I thought before smiling and saying I really needed to go to the bathroom.

I left my horrible pajamas over the flush tank, unbuttoned an extra button on my shirt, and folded my sleeves for a more casual look. I looked like a teenager and laughed at myself. The fact is, I didn’t expect any flirtatious battles for that night, so I decided to fight using the weapons I had.

I returned to the conversation and found out the Irish accent was harder than I thought. Our friend in red translated almost everything

he said to me. I could understand what she said, but I didn't understand a word spoken by the guys.

He, born in Ireland, single, 37 years old, businessman of the civil engineering field. I, Brazilian, journalist, divorced, 37 years old and a traveler without destination.

He found incredible my courage to travel around the world and wondered how it was possible for a woman as beautiful as me to be alone after six months on the road.

- The lucky guy hasn't found me yet – I said, shrugging, but full of confidence.

Driven by the beers he'd already had, he was on his knee in the middle of the room.

- Please, marry me.

Me and the couple of friends laughed, surprised, but some people at the pub thought it was a real marriage proposal and started clapping, that made him stand up.

I was having fun like never before, being courted like that, precisely by the man who had gotten my full attention since the first second.

Our conversation became more private and his friends walked away. At that point, we started using Google Translator because I was really having a hard time trying to understand the accent.

At some point, we were stuck in a pointless discussion in which I said I was absolutely sure that he had said nothing like "I want to kiss you" in English. Then, he repeated over and over again. "Of course I said it. I want to kiss you. I want to kiss you".

- This discussion is going nowhere – he stated. Let's get serious.

- Well, you already got down on one knee and asked me to marry you and I stayed here. You're telling me you wanna kiss me and I'm still here – I said regardlessly.

- What does that mean? – he was anxious.

- Do it, please.

The night ended with laughter and a question: will we see each other again? We lit a cigarette outside the pub and said goodbye to Lilly and Mike. He lived a few hours from Dublin and was in the capital for a friend's birthday. He would go back home the next day and asked me to go to his hotel.

We slept together, but, believe me, we didn't have sex.

Next morning, after I left, Conor texted asking me about my plans for the afternoon. He was supposed to go home to work, but he said he'd take the day off to stay with me in Dublin.

How to resist a handsome man who changes his plans for me? I gave up on my plans to go to the cliffs and we met at a cafe

downtown.

He looked shorter than last night, but still handsome. We talked about our families, work, and I, unenthusiastically, revealed that I had divorced a few months ago, without giving him details of what had happened.

I didn't like to talk about my story, but I didn't like to lie either. My impression was that people kept thinking: recently divorced, it's certainly not over.

I wasn't sure whether it was over or not. Is there a measure for suffering? Who says if I cried enough and I'm already free to move on? Do you have a deadline to stop suffering? These are the questions that the ego usually asks, but there's no right answer.

He was the same age as me and told me that he hadn't gotten married yet. He tried to find some explanation, but I said he didn't need a reason. Maybe that was another answer only the ego would like to hear.

We finished the coffee and went for a beer at Brazen Head right after, the place is said to be the oldest pub in the country. The conversation brightened up with the three huge glasses of Guinness. We had dinner together and he decided to spend another night in Dublin.

On the way to the hotel, I asked if I could consider that afternoon as a romantic meeting. A date, as they say.

- How is dating in Brazil? – he wanted to know.

- No one invites you for a coffee in the middle of the afternoon. It's usually some beer or dinner at night. – I explained.

- Well, we had some coffee, three beers and we also had dinner together. What else do you need to consider this a date? – he said holding my waist and kissing my cheek while I just smiled, pleased.

We finally made love, and all that magic went on between the sheets, but with so much more chemistry and a scary intimacy for the first time. Everything was better than I expected, and the problem was exactly that. He was too perfect for me. Unconsciously, I believed I didn't deserve someone so special and wonderful in my life. Of course I didn't know that back then. But I felt like something was missing and it wasn't him. It was missing in myself.

Next morning, while we had breakfast, he said he'd like to see me again.

I explained that my next destination was Munich, but the rest of my trip was open.

- I can have some vacation soon. Let's make this work? – he asked.

- We have to choose where and when – I answered a little reticent, wondering if that was really real.

- How about Italy in early August, starting on the second or third? Maybe Milan? he suggested quickly. I, who had no idea of the next steps, agreed on the spot.

He went back to his hometown and, as if the amount of beer in the last days was not enough, I went to the Guinness Factory.

27 – CHARM, LUCK AND FRIENDS

I got my ticket to Munich, in Germany, by chance. Still in Liverpool, even before buying a bus ticket to Ireland, I opened the Skyscanner browser and searched "from Dublin to anywhere." The cheapest ticket out of Ireland was Munich, for 16 euros.

As I was still paying everything in sterling, I found it wise to set aside the northern countries. The currency also made me put Sweden, Norway, and Denmark for a next trip and follow the cheapest route to Germany.

After the unpleasant experience with my drunken host, I ended up canceling my Munich accommodation on Couchsurfing. I looked more closely at the profile of the boy who offered me the landing and noticed that I would have to share the same room with him. I learned to consider other aspects of hosting before accepting an offer. However, while splitting the days between historic tours and flirting with the Irish, I was having difficulty finding another bed offer and paying for a hostel was no longer possible.

Although I knew I would have to share a room with the last host who had accepted my request, I felt something reliable about him. I can't explain, it was just intuition. I was a little embarrassed to tell him that I changed my mind, but I thought the worst he could say was no. If this happens, I'll pay a hostel for one night and keep trying other people until someone accepts me.

I sent a new message to Massimiliano the day before the flight. Extremely kind, he told me that I was welcome and could stay as long as I needed. I said I would spend a maximum of two nights, but I ended up staying four and could not have had a more rewarding experience.

Son of an Italian father and a German mother, Massi had already traveled around the world. On his wooden desk, a huge yellowed map had several green thumbtacks attached to every country he visited. I wished to have the same map in my house one day. The line of green dots from Germany to some countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, South America, and Central America was amazing.

In the apartment, the bedroom and the kitchen shared the same space, and there was a bathroom and a balcony. There was no way we could sleep in separate rooms. Also, the room had only one double bed.

After exhausting my arguments for him to sleep in the bed, I made sure to find the most comfortable place I could for him to sleep on the floor.

Our time together was lovely. Every night we cooked, drank

wine, and smoked on the porch. I listened to some very interesting stories from his trip, and of course, we had a lot of fun with the memes of when Germany defeated Brazil 7-1 at the World Cup.

During the day, while Massi was working, I would take the subway to explore the city with a Polish woman who contacted me via the Couchsurfing messaging app.

Oksana was 23, a curious mind and an open heart for any adventure. We talk about the conspiracies the universe makes when we are following our dreams and we made a very special connection. On our last night in Munich, I invited her to join me at a happy hour with my host and some friends.

It was an epic night for ethylic reasons. I ended up at Massi's friend's house and my Polish friend ended up in Massi's arms.

28 – LESSONS FROM THE PAST

For the first two nights in Berlin, I was hosted by Couchsurfing in a private room at Peter's house. With dozens of good references, he was delighted to welcome travelers and his apartment was all filled with colorful labels and post-its to make life easier for guests. In addition, he still served breakfast and we could use the washing machine. I was delighted with his hospitality.

Peter had traveled the world a lot and was focused on writing a book to teach travelers how to make money on the road. I had a keen interest in the subject, and although I couldn't understand much, it involved discount websites and tourist tips he was also planning to launch.

Vibrant and full of history, Berlin conquered me right away. Two nights wouldn't be enough to see and feel everything the city held. I wanted to stay longer, but it couldn't be at Peter's house because he already had another guest. Unsuccessful at Couchsurfing requests, I contacted Roseane, my friend from Brazil who had a son studying in Berlin. By this point in time, I was no longer ashamed of anything and I was straight with her.

- I accept any carpet on the floor where I can spend three or four nights. I don't need comfort, I just need a roof to feel safe.

The same day, I was looking for the address of a student dorm.

Etto, my friend's son, would stay in his girlfriend's room and I could have his room. He just asked me not to mind the mess. I just thought that after the Irish host's house no mess would surprise me.

The truth is I loved staying in a genuine student dorm, with empty beer bottles everywhere and lots of clothes scattered around the doors of the lodgings. In the kitchen, the chair models followed the same variety of glasses and the nationality of the residents.

My dear host's room had what was needed: a bed, a desk, a dresser, and a leaning bicycle.

For me, the two most interesting points in the city were the Berlin Wall, for the reflections it brought me, and the Holocaust Museum, for making me realize that empathy was something strong in me.

Walking the nearly two kilometers of what was left of the wall that divided Germany between East and West between 1961 and 1989, I was trying to explain to myself that the world's largest open-air art gallery was born to resignify the past of pain and separation that those walls symbolized.

The same bricks that broke an entire nation in half today served to express freedom in every possible color and to protest any remnant of separatist discourse that still insists to exist from the most

conservative people.

Berliners could look at that wall and forever mourn the dark past it has to tell. But never forgetting the pulsing history of these stones, the city decided to use the same cement to voice a call for equality and unity.

Sitting in front of one of the graffiti, I thought that, like Germany, I could not change my past, but I could look at my story in a different way. I could let time fade the years of happiness I lived with Felipe and throw a pale gray over the sad and painful end of our marriage. Or I could use all those teachings to make myself a much stronger woman.

That day, I understood that it didn't matter what I lived, but who I became after what I lived.

29 – IT CAN ALWAYS GET BETTER

Messaging with Conor was daily and I continued my journey following intuition. On this sabbatical, I was willing to go to the cities that I had never dreamed of going. Prague and Budapest were on the list and I decided to get a ride to East Europe.

No doubt that the thumbs-up image of the roadside backpacker popped into my mind. It would be amazing to stand in the middle of the road waiting to know which heart would tune in the same energy and stop the car to take me to the next destination. Since I didn't have the guts to do this on my own, I opened my Blablacar profile and selected a shared ride. There, in a more controlled environment, I could assess the driver, have some prior information about the trip and know the time of departure and arrival at the destination.

I boarded the car of a couple who lived in Prague but were in Berlin visiting family. Another traveler who seemed to speak German was in the car. Since English was not anyone's mother tongue, the trip was quite quiet and I took the time to reflect on the choices I was making.

After a while, my thoughts started to get very mixed up and I decided to focus on the present. I was in a car with three strangers on a road between Germany and the Czech Republic. The sun was beginning to paint the sky with orange tones announcing the end of the day and the radio was playing a song whose lyrics in a completely foreign language meant nothing to me, but the melody seemed happy.

When we landed at the agreed-upon location, I spotted a McDonald's sign and gave thanks for having a place to use the internet. I went to Google Maps and figured out which train would take me to my hostel, since I couldn't get Couchsurfing accommodation in Prague. I just found out why the price of that hostel was so stupidly low when I got there.

There was no lift and my accommodation was on the fifth floor. The bed was on the floor, the toilets were on the second floor, and the lockers were in the basement. As the doors had no keys, it was not safe to leave the backpack in the rooms. To make matters worse, the wifi only worked at the reception.

I didn't stress about these details. I took a shower and stayed on the first floor using the internet.

"What to do in Prague"… before I finished typing, a red-capped boy touched my shoulder.

- Hello, my name is Simon, I'm from Germany.

- Paula from Brazil, nice to meet you – I answered.

- My friend and I are going downtown to watch the full moon

from the main square. Do you want to join us? – I had nothing to do, so I accepted. After all, you don't reject an invitation to see the full moon, do you?

I put the phone away and followed the two strangers. The other young man was a very witty Nigerian who assured me of a good laugh. Too bad he left the next morning.

In the central square of Prague were dozens of tourists lying on the floor. The temperature was delicious and the centuries-old architecture looked even more beautiful with the night lighting. The restaurants sold beer in plastic glasses for those who preferred to enjoy the night stretched out on the dark cobblestones. We also lay on the ground, but unfortunately, it was cloudy and the moon was hidden.

We returned to the hostel and Simon offered to accompany me on my visit to Prague Castle the next day. I accepted the company, we decided the time and I climbed the five floors of stairs.

Despite sleeping on the floor, the bed was very comfortable and I had a night of deep sleep. Maybe I was just very tired. I opened the free food cabinet in the kitchen, made some black coffee to wake up, and met Simon for our outing.

It was hot and we climbed the slopes to the castle, chasing the shadows of the walls and roofs. Legions of Asians occupied every space that July morning, carrying their photographic equipment behind their chattering tour guides.

We stopped in a garden to ward off the heat and talked under a giant tree. A sad-looking bride posed for her photographer while the groom smiled looking away. Was it a real couple or was it an advertising piece? They didn't seem to be in love when they hugged.

Speaking of hugging, as my fellow companion and I talked about the benefits of traveling alone, I felt his right hand slip over my shoulders. I immediately asked what he was doing.

- I don't remember hinting that you could hug me," I said, taking his arm off my back politely.

- I'm sorry. We have been walking together since yesterday, we talked about so many things. I thought I could make a move. Don't you date with anyone while traveling? he snapped.

- Of course I do. I date who interests me. – I answered without thinking about how he would interpret that.

- So I'm not interesting? – he questioned.

- I date the ones who I feel attracted to." I rephrased it, but it was to no avail.

- So I'm not attractive? You don't think I'm good-looking?

How to say that you are not interested without offending the person? I always knew what it felt like to be rejected, but I had never

stopped to think about how difficult it can be to reject someone.

I didn't want him to feel ugly because he wasn't. I didn't mean that he wasn't attractive either. I just wanted to say that I was not attracted to him. No matter how careful I was when choosing the words, his interpretation depended on the filters that only he had.

That little moment, on a wooden bench in the gardens of Prague Castle, taught me what I had failed to learn in all of the relationships I had in my life. I have re-signified many beliefs about rejection from that moment on and, even today, I go back to that moment when someone doesn't say what I want to hear.

At the end of the day, after splitting the grocery shopping and eating lunch in the hostel kitchen, I grabbed a 2 euro wine and went looking for a good place to watch the sunset and the full moon. Simon did not wait for an invitation and came with me.

We missed the transport and had to walk a long distance until we reached the park. We lost the sunset but found a perfect place to enjoy the full moon. A gazebo with some stalls and a DJ playing pop music.

I saw some people sitting on an even higher slab and didn't think twice. From above, it was possible to see the bridges that cut across the Vltava River like strands of light.

The moon, sprinkled with a pearly mist, looked like a blur in the Prussian blue sky. It was hot, but a cool breeze blew softly. A Portuguese couple had fun beside us while I drank my cheap white wine.

- What a perfect night, right? We have music, drink and this spectacular view of Prague. It can't get better than this. – I commented, relaxed.

My German colleague seemed to have gotten over my rejection earlier and only agreed with a half-smile, nodding. Just then, a ray of stars rose from the ground and lit the sky with a shower of fireworks.

Everyone celebrated that first rocket with clapping and shouting. And then we were surprised by a pyrotechnic show worthy of New Year's parties. It was more than three minutes of fireworks of various colors, sounds, and patterns. The Portuguese couple noticed my exclamations in the familiar language and asked me if I knew the reason for the fireworks.

"It's for me," I said, laughing. "You don't know me, but I'm very special."

I can't explain how happy I felt. The fireworks had nothing to do with me. It was certainly in celebration of some wedding or anniversary, but I was there at the exact moment and I was able to watch everything from a privileged angle. If I had planned to live something special in Prague, I wouldn't have imagined something so surprising.

We walked more than two kilometers to get back to the hostel and I told Simon I wasn't ready to go to sleep yet. I thanked the company and informed him that I was going to tour the Old Town.

Luckily for me, he didn't offer to join me, but he asked me to write down his phone number. Before I finished typing all the numbers on the keyboard, he surprised me with a proposal:

- If you want to have sex later let me know. I don't want anything serious. We can just have fun.

Saying this in Portuguese sounds even more disturbing and it took me a few seconds to decode the message. I put on a poker face, thanked the invitation to turn my back trying to process it.

No one had ever been so direct and clear to me. I was disturbed, but I thought it might be an efficient type of communication for him.

30 – EMOTION FESTIVAL

The owner of the minivan who gave me a lift to Vienna was a former Czech journalist who left his former job to work in tourism. The other two passengers were from Karlovy Vary. They told me about many places that had historical participation in the Nazi period and made me desire to return to explore the Czech Republic more carefully.

Since they spoke the same language as the driver, I spent most of the trip quiet, watching the moon on the horizon and thinking how proud I was of myself. I could be in Brazil crying because the things I had planned for that year had not gone the way I expected. But look: I'm on a ride from the Czech Republic to Austria, and learning thousands of new things from people I didn't even know existed.

Luckily for me, the drop off point in Vienna was next to the subway station. I used public wifi and found that I was less than a 15-minute-walk-distance from the hostel.

At this point in time, Skyscanner had already shown me a plane ticket from Budapest to Milan for 12 euros. I used the "anywhere" tool again, and the universe was right on Conor's suggestion while we were still in Dublin.

The daily conversations with the Irishman went from texting to video calling and he was eager to see me again.

- Six days to see each other, but it seems like forever – I read it on my cell phone as soon as I accessed the hostel's internet.

- Don't overreact, it's only been 15 days since we last met in Dublin," I said.

- Feels like 20 years ago – he dramatized.

- What will happen to our days in Italy if we don't like each other? That question had begun to haunt me a few days ago. I wasn't so anxious, but that was a possibility.

- Do you think there is such a chance? – Conor asked.

- We spent less than 48 hours together, Conor. Maybe you'll find soon I'm not your kind of girl," I explained, trying to get his feet on the ground.

- For Christ's sake, look at yourself. You're very much my kind of girl," he said, sending me a picture with a funny expression.

I can't deny that Conor's attention had an effect on my self-esteem. He seemed to have taken a course on how to please romantic women with words. More than that, he knew exactly when and how to use them.

Despite having doubts about our meeting, I was absolutely calm. That part of the trip was a secret dream, created in my mind many

years before I thought of getting divorced while reading Chico Buarque's book "Budapeste".

During my days in Eastern Europe, I was so focused on visiting the places I had always dreamed of, that I didn't have time to design my romantic stay in Milan. Living in the present is good because it avoids excessive expectations.

Vienna surprised me by the cleanliness of the streets and buildings. A medieval city that seemed rejuvenated by the almost-religious silence of the parks. I spent hours among hundreds of species of roses in a garden next to the Vienna State Opera. There were large beds of roses in yellow, red, pink and white. I just wondered how dazzled my mother would be to see so many different colors and sizes of roses. I made several videos to send to her.

After leaving the garden, I happened to end up in the town hall square, Rathausplatz, and came across a huge movie screen on the gothic facade of the main building. I got on the internet right away and found that a free movie festival was going on there.

When I returned at night for the show, the chairs were almost all taken. I secured a seat on the back and the screen was painted a pale beige with "The Great Ghosts" by Yoann Bourgeois. Filmed in the Pantheon in Italy, the video featured a series of artistic performances where the bodies of the dancers mingled with the gears of a machine.

I began to wonder if I knew how to admire works of art and concluded that art is never just what its author intended. Art lingers in every human being who contemplates it, interprets it, and feels it. A work of art will be unique as long as only its author has access to it. After that, art belongs to everyone who observes it and understands it. It may look similar to some, but it will never be the same.

The second film featured the performance of two works by the Finnish Jean Sibelius by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. The young Santtu-Matias Rouvali, also Finnish was the conductor. I got emotional and cried several times. There I began to understand that I did not need to study Arts to admire it.

I understood that art is available to every thinking being on this planet who has the least sensitivity. What thrilled me the most that night was the discovery that I have always liked the arts, although I believed I didn't have the slightest critical sense to say anything about it.

31 – REALITY IS BETTER THAN THE DREAM

When I arrived at my host's apartment in the suburbs of Budapest, where I would spend only one night, he soon invited me to drive around the city. Full of energy, he opened the cover of his mossy-green convertible and we toured through the main monuments of the city. It was night, and the bridges and historic buildings were lit with golden light.

When we arrived at the Citadel, I couldn't believe I was in Budapest. As I became aware that this was no longer a dream, that it was no longer my mind wondering what Chico Buarque described, my eyes simply told me that Budapest was even more beautiful than I had dreamed.

When I first read Chico Buarque's book, I made several mental photographs of the city. At that time, I already knew Rio de Janeiro, so the counterpoint didn't charm me so much. However, it was impossible not to compare the Paula who was in Rio de Janeiro months earlier, with the Paula who was in Budapest. I really felt like the character Jose Costa, the opposite of my own identity, but the most beautiful opposite.

From high above the Citadella, there was an endless black veil embroidered with stars on either side of the glittering zigzag of bridges that span the Danube river. It was all dark and a dazzling gold design.

The next day, during my walking tour, I was absolutely amazed by Budapest, and I couldn't decide if the city was better during the night or the day. Living the reality of the dream with passion made my stay in Hungary so magical and overjoyed. It was real life dressed in a dream. It made me spend hours looking at the Parliament, the lions on the Chain Bridge, and the poetic scenery in the medieval Castle neighbourhood.

On the second day, after visiting the Buda Castle, I walked to a Starbucks and wrote my first post for my blog.

I had already written at least four versions of the first post and reread them all, trying to improve them. I gave up everything I had tried to say so far and started from scratch. I cried a lot as I wrote those words. I reviewed, edited, published, publicized on social networks and left the cafeteria, losing access to the Internet. It was like burning the ships. It was done and I didn't want to go back.

I was afraid of judgment. What would the friends who knew my story think? What would my family say? Did I expose myself too

much? What would my fellow journalists think of my text? What would people think of the decision to tell about myself on a blog? After all, will any soul be interested in reading it?

Even today, remembering all these questions and fears, I have a secret desire to go back and erase everything I've told you since, but I burned the ships. There is no going back. There is no way to "unpublish" it. The word, once spoken, is like a thrown arrow. Can't go back again.

I went to the Shoe Memorial on the banks of the Danube River and stayed there for over an hour thinking about human cruelty.

During WWII, Jews captured by the Nazis in Budapest were executed and their bodies thrown into the river. Queued on the banks of the Danube, they were forced to take off their shoes before they fell into the water, shot down in the head. Men, women, the elderly, and children died this way and some pairs of shoes were eternalized in bronze in memory of them.

At that moment, I forgot about my personal drama. My vanity at the possible criticism that could be emerging on the Internet was irrelevant in the face of the death of so many innocent people. I wondered what was the sin of being born Jewish, black or Gypsy?

By the time I arrived in front of the Hungarian Parliament building, the horizon was already pink and lilac. It was hot and the city was starting to light up again. It was amazing how all the sights and bridges had the same golden lighting.

The Parliament lit up behind me and I spent some time trying to get a good shot until I remembered to look for a wifi signal. As I was standing in front of a public building, I had free internet and started reading the first comments about my blog. I was really thrilled to read dozens of messages praising my strength and courage.

I was silently watching the boats docking on the shore and I cried for allowing myself to live it all.

I was about two miles from my hostel and I came back walking and feeling the night breeze. Car headlights and people crossing the busy streets and straying on the sidewalks seemed to have rehearsed a dance. When I arrived at Elisabeth Square, I was crying with joy and happiness and I wanted to hug the children playing in the playground.

From far away, I heard someone playing a Pagode[10] tune. A samba circle was beginning to form and I sat close, feeling at home. On the other side, you could see a huge illuminated Ferris wheel. The Samba soon gathered Brazilian tourists, and then some foreigners trying to imitate our swing.

I returned to the hostel to pack my luggage for the next day, and just as I was in the shower, watching the foam run down the grimy drain of the box, I remembered that the next day I would meet Conor

in Milan. At that moment, I was glad to realize that, besides making me feel good about myself, that flirting wasn't getting me out of my way or making me anxious.

I got out of the shower and talked to him for a few minutes on his cell phone.

"I'm on my way to Dublin to catch the plane. I'll spend the night at a hotel next to the airport in Milan," he said, sending a picture of the car's steering wheel.

- Are you anxious? I asked.

- Counting every second.

I went out for one last beer in Budapest and the next morning I left the hostel at 4:30 carrying my backpacks. I paid 3 euros for the direct bus to the airport and said goodbye to Budapest.

32 – ANGUISH AND PLEASURE

The airport bus dropped me right in front of a cafeteria at Milan Central Station. I bought a bottle of mineral water, asked for the wifi password, and put my two backpacks on the wooden table outside. It was around 10:30 and very hot.

Conor emerged from behind a bus. Sunglasses, light shorts and a brown T-shirt, flip-flops and a wheeled suitcase. With his cell phone in one hand, he was looking around trying to find me. I smiled and waved. I could tell he was a little nervous. We didn't kiss and he complained about the heat.

When we got on the taxi, he finally took my hand and asked if I was okay. I said yes with a smile.

The hotel, chosen by him, was on a busy corner, next to a subway station and just 300 meters away from the Duomo Cathedral.

The receptionist didn't hide how strange he thought the situation was. My old jeans, white T-shirt, filthy sneakers, and two backpacks had nothing to do with the fancy European guy who handed him our passports. Still, he smiled and seemed to like my messy hair tied up and my shirt tied around my waist. The typical hostel backpacker and the classy European tourist. It seemed like the perfect adventure for people with lots of imagination.

We left the luggage at the front desk and went looking for somewhere to have lunch and kill time until check-in. We got into a restaurant in front of the church and I couldn't believe my eyes with the price of a salad. I put on a poker face and Conor didn't seem to care.

While I was eating, he asked me an unexpected and disturbing question.

- What is the maximum number of orgasms you have ever had in a single night with a guy?

It took me a few seconds to think, but I had understood the question perfectly. I asked him to repeat just to buy time. I'd never been asked a question like that.

- Why do you wanna know? – I asked buying more time.

- Curiosity – he smiled, frowning his face around his blue eyes.

- Three times – I answered disguising how embarrassed I was.

Canada came to mind immediately and I don't know why I couldn't remember anything about my life before the divorce. It felt like I had no right to talk about my marriage as my experiences. It was like everything I had lived with Felipe was someone else's story.

- I'll give you four – he said with his blue eyes staring at the horizon while sipping water calmly.

- How confident! How can you be so sure? – I provoked him.

- I read your whole body the first time we made love – he put his glass of water down and stared at me.

I spent the next two minutes listening to the fullest description anyone could've given of my behavior in bed. Fork suspended and mouth slightly open, with a slight smile of embarrassment and satisfaction altogether. I couldn't understand everything, but I didn't dare interrupt. What I could understand was enough to make my whole body tingle. It was so unexpected and surprising that I can only remember a few words. It was as if the world around me had slowed down and I could hear the wind being cut by the wings of the pigeons a few feet from our table.

We spent the rest of the afternoon locked in the hotel room and Conor only had some rest after keeping his promise.

Exhausted after having so much attention and after many days sleeping in strangers' houses and smelly beds in cheap hostels, I fell asleep deeply in the white sheets of that huge comfortable bed. When the cathedral bells rang at 6 pm, he woke me up with a kiss and showed me a picture he made while I was sleeping.

- You sleep like a drunk princess. I've been out for a beer, I came back, showered and you're still in the same position – he stumbled, pulling the sheets off my naked body – I made a reservation at a restaurant for 8:30 pm – he said.

I took a long and relaxing shower and, after my little spa, I wore my prettiest dress, put on some makeup, and we walked to the restaurant. It was a lovely evening and, before the restaurant, he ordered some appetizers at the Martini bar, a bar designed by Dolce & Gabbana.

Most likely one of the most expensive bars in Italy.

An indoor garden full of tropical plants, air conditioned and background music. The glass tables set together with black leather chairs and reddish lighting. The drinks were even more expensive than our lunch in front of Duomo square. I was embarrassed. It was clear that he wasn't trying to impress me, but I started to feel like I was a luxury prostitute.

That feeling wasn't good, and I probably closed myself a little, but Conor still treated me with the same affection and wonder from when we'd met in Dublin. He made jokes that I couldn't understand, and I'd laugh exactly because of that.

After dinner, at a rooftop bar where we could see most of the city, we had more wine, smoked several cigarettes, took pictures together, and laughed walking on the cobblestone streets, both drunk. When we arrived at the hotel, he made a video to record how difficult it was for us to go upstairs.

The next morning, he let me know that the first ride of the day would be to San Siro Stadium, Milan and Inter Milan's home. Conor made the plans for our tour in Italy and was looking forward to the most romantic part of the day: Lake Garda. We'd leave for the tour in a rented car the next morning.

After visiting the stadium, he left the rest of the day up to me and I chose to go to Castello Sforzesco and for a walk in the Sempione Park and the Arch of Peace.

When we were walking back to the hotel, I was still trying to understand the bad feeling that was bothering me.

- You choose where we'll have dinner tonight – Conor said, holding my waist.

Bingo. I got an even stronger bad feeling. I was feeling financially dependent on him. It was the same feeling I had in the first months of marriage, when I left work and college aside to cross Brazil and become a housewife.

I didn't like that. Although I had said I'd travel the world backpacking, I had no idea I'd feel bad being pampered at four-star hotels and fine restaurants. But now I was already there and needed to do something not to feel that way. So, I decided I'd pay the price to feel like the independent woman I was working to be.

- I'll choose the restaurant and pay the bill – I let him know.

- I've already said you don't have to worry about that – he said carefully.

- I know, but I want to.

Arriving at the hotel, I went online and researched tips on good places to have pasta. I already knew that decision would mess up my entire monthly budget, but if it would help me feel better, I was willing to do it.

33 – A ROMANTIC LAKE AND AN ABYSS

Green mountains, narrow curves, and the radio playing Bruce Springsteen in our rented car. Two hours in deep peace. His strong hand lying on my left thigh as he'd sing the successes of his greatest idol.

When I was still going from Germany to Eastern Europe, Conor sent me some pictures of Lake Garda and asked many times if I thought the destination was too romantic for our first trip together. I said it was amazing.

When we first saw the huge turquoise lake high in the mountains, we were speechless. Yes, it was too romantic, but it was the perfect place.

The balcony of our room was between the hotel pool and the shores of the lake. It was a beautiful sunny day and the heat forced us to spend the rest of the afternoon near the water.

After the shower, the high summer temperature gave us a break and he gave me the car keys with a warning: "Today I'll drink".

We went around the Saló area, where we were staying, looking for a restaurant for dinner and I disobeyed almost all the GPS commands. After months of not touching the steering wheel of a car, I drove straight through some bumpers and missed the best parking spaces because I was too focused on the automatic gear shift. After every mistake I made driving, he'd swear half a dozen times in English and he seemed to enjoy making me even more nervous. I understood his intention and had fun together.

Bright, wide, and lighted sidewalks gathered hotels and restaurants across the west shore of the lake. Many colorful flowers and the Italian buzz around the tables made me feel immersed in an unknown movie.

We walked in silence after dinner and ended our first night in Garda with a well-behaved glass of wine in our hotel bar.

It was clear that we were falling apart and I knew that my behavior was causing that situation. I wondered if he realized that an abyss was opening between us, even though we were still making love and having fun together.

The next day, after cycling around the fancy village, he said he'd like to stay in the mountains and we switched hotels. A charming place, high on a hill where we could see the huge lake.

The cozy and well decorated room was on a small farm, and dinner, made exclusively from what was produced on the property,

was served on the huge porch of the family home.

There was no menu, and the meals, different each day, were kindly explained by the matriarch; a slight lady who was also the cook.

There were always two starter options, main course, and dessert. Everything was so delicious that it was impossible to refuse the full menu. We stayed two nights there and had dinner in the same place, always with a bottle of wine.

On the second day, Conor wanted to rent a boat. It was very windy and we were told not to cross the lake. There were hours of silence and no approach between us. I was already feeling rejected again and didn't know what to do to change all that. I'd like to ask what was going on, but wasn't sure if something was really happening. It could just be my perception. My filters.

That night I insisted on paying the seventy-two euros for dinner and I had the impression he understood my need to share the expenses.

Next morning we drove about 40 minutes north to reach an area called Limone. Neither of us liked the place where we spent our last day together. The hotel pool was huge, but full of tourists. So we preferred to cross the street and enjoy the sun on a private lawn for the guests next to the lake.

- I'll spend some days working in London then I'll go home. And you? – he asked me when we were having a sandwich for lunch in the hotel snack bar. Conor had already said he'd like me to spend some more time in Ireland.

- I have a trip around the world to complete – I said without looking at him.

We were silent looking at different directions and I wanted to cry. I wanted to say so many things about what was going on inside me. But just the way it happened in Toronto, I didn't know how to express my feelings in English.

In fact, not a whole dictionary on my mother tongue could help me understand my feelings. I wanted to say that I liked him, but not enough to give up on my trip.

In the afternoon, while he was swimming in the cold waters of the lake, I was watching him from my sun lounger and crying in silence.

The next morning I drove to Verona airport and we said goodbye to each other without any promises. We didn't fall in love and I could see that made us both feel a little frustrated.

Outside the airport, I walked without knowing where to go and got on the first bus to Venice I saw, where I didn't even have a room booked.

34 – LITTLE MONEY AND A LOT OF ANXIETY

I got off the bus at Santa Lucia Station and connected to wifi immediately. The cheapest bed I found was 18 euros and it was less than a mile away. I only booked it for one night.

I left my backpack in the closet and went for a walk to think about what to do. I had more than 20 days before August ended and I had spent about 300 euros on my romantic and full of mixed feelings week in Milan and Garda. My budget was supposed to be around 30 or 20 euros a day. Paying 18 for the bed, I had only 2 for food.

Couchsurfing accommodation didn't seem safe in Italy. When I put my trip to Rome status public on the platform, more than 25 men offered me accommodation in less than 3 hours. In addition, I began to receive countless daily messages for meetings and the Italian guys harassment on the street bothered me. Only in Brazil I had seen similar male behavior.

I walked randomly through the alleys and bridges of Venice without worrying about where to go. I was too anxious and didn't know what was disturbing my peace.

The afternoon began to say goodbye and the coolest breeze of the night touching my body also calmed down my thoughts. After 2 hours walking through the city's mazes, it was time to get some rest and understand what was happening to me. I turned right into a narrow corridor, faced another canal and saw the Rialto Bridge. Under the bridge, I took off my shoes, sat down and put my feet in the water. I was the only human being alone among dozens of couples who were posing for photos with the gondolas in the background.

I got access to public wifi from a nearby restaurant and two messages changed my day.

The first one was from Facebook. A German friend who I had met doing volunteer work in Parana a few years ago was back in Germany and was inviting me to visit him. I needed a more fixed address for a few days to open a bank account in Europe and this would be the perfect opportunity.

When I checked WhatsApp, an audio from Felipe surprised me. We had no contact after our last conversation in Toronto.

"Paula, I passed the test. If there's someone who knows what that means to me, that's you. Thank you for all the support in the last few years. "

I got emotional.

In the last four years of our marriage, I witnessed his dedication to pass a very important test within his career as an army officer. We cried together feeling the frustration after each negative result. I really knew how important that was for him, because in a way, what's important to the ones we love becomes important to us too. I answered the audio congratulating him and saying I was happy to know that at least part of our plan would take place. He'd arrive in Rio de Janeiro with the new car, but without me, Max and the baby.

Before that thought made me sad, I got up and started looking for a way back to the hostel. I didn't know what to do yet and hoped that a night's sleep would give me back the serenity lost in the days I spent with Conor.

But the next morning came with the same doubts. I was distressed in Venice, I missed Conor in a strange way, but at the same time I was relieved not to be with him anymore. I wanted to know what was happening to me and couldn't find answers.

I felt guilty about being in Italy, in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, making such an amazing trip, and not being overflowing with happiness for it.

I booked a room in a hostel in Florence and also a lift from Blablacar to get there. When I stopped for lunch and had a 1.80 euro pizza, which would be my only meal of the day, I got a message saying my lift had been canceled. I tried others and ended up buying a bus ticket.

Upset about having spent more than I expected on extras, I got even sadder. Mainly because I didn't see how I could do what I wanted the most in Venice: to ride the canals on a gondola.

35 – A LOVE CALLED ‘MYSELF’

When I was still married, long before I thought about traveling around the world, whenever I imagined myself in Venice, I had the image of a gondola ride through the canals of the city. Yeah, I know, this must be a dream come true for anyone who wants to know Venice. But the long-awaited tour cost 80 euros, not negotiable during the summer holidays.

I was very sad because things didn’t seem to be working very well lately. Saying goodbye to Conor triggered a huge feeling of emptiness in me and I realized that I began to spread this feeling to every other area of my life. I decided not to cherish that feeling that my dreams weren’t possible. If necessary, I’d use some money from my emergency reserve that month and then the tour became my priority.

It may sound silly, after all, I was already in Venice, I was already touring the world. Would I want more than that? Yes, I would. Taking the gondola ride alone would be my gift. It was Italy’s most romantic ride, perhaps one of the most romantic ones in the world, and I wanted to feel that I didn’t need to have a partner to be happy. I wanted to take myself on that romantic ride.

I packed my luggage at the hostel and ran to the nearest boat station. The gondolas are all over the canals of Venice. An Indian couple interrupted my negotiation with the boatman and offered to share the gondola with me. I thought it would be a good idea. But they were with their teenage daughter and wanted to pay 50% of the amount. I found it unfair, since there were three people against one, but I still offered 65% to them and 35% to me, I thought it would be reasonable to split the money among the three of us at least, but he insisted on paying 50%.

I didn’t even get annoyed at their insistence, because I really wanted to go on the ride alone. I confess I was pleased to say no and get on the gondola on my own. I felt powerful.

It would be an exaggeration to say that those 30 minutes at sunset had changed my trip. I hadn’t realized yet that I was having some premenstrual syndrome symptoms, the reason why for that avalanche of mixed feelings. However, that evening I was the most important person in my life. I was what I had always been. The individual Paula, complete, unique and infinite.

36 – THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING TO BE GRATEFUL FOR

In seven days, I visited Florence, Pisa and Rome. It was unbearably hot in Italy. PMS was making me more anxious than ever about my financial situation. I had the option of going back to Germany and staying at Mika's house for a few days, but I didn't know if I'd still go back to Italy on this trip.

I recalculated my budget and realized I could still visit some main cities. My mind wasn't working on a backpacking style in a sabbatical year yet. For this kind of trip, you need to change your mindset and I only found that out later. The experiences I've had in my previous vacation trips hadn't let me see the possibilities of traveling in a calmer way. Still, I can't deny that I had learned a lot of new things so far.

When I arrived in Florence at dawn, I found out the hostel I had booked a room made a mistake with my check-in time and there was no ready bed or receptionist on duty. They sent me an email saying that they wouldn't charge for my accommodation, but that night I wouldn't be able to stay there.

I walked about two miles at dawn looking for another hostel I could check in at 2 am and I even asked to sleep at the front desk at one of the places I went to.

I was exhausted and sent one last email to the owner of the first hostel I had contacted.

"Please, I have nowhere to sleep and I'd spend a lot on transportation to try to go elsewhere. I'm tired. I need you to help me. I can sleep on the reception floor if I have to. Any place will do".

He sent me the password for the door and asked me to sleep in the kitchen. I went upstairs, three floors with my luggage, which I felt like it was weighing a ton. When the door unlocked, the light from the window showed a white desk about three feet wide supporting a large and outdated laptop. It was a room of about two square meters with an old map of Italy and three high bar stools on the wall opposite a big window without curtains. In the right corner of the door, a dust-covered artificial foliage was trying to give the place some life. The streetlight was yellow and gave a retro look to those few objects that didn't match.

I walked into the kitchen and saw a rubber floor full of crumbs and shoe marks, too dirty to serve as a bed. There was a tiny, rust-peeled fridge in the left corner. Between the fridge and the wooden cabinet that held the sink and stove, there was a table stuck to the

wall of grimy tiles that were once yellow. There were three different chairs against the greasy table. It felt like a horrible place to sleep.

I left my bags by the fridge and decided to run to the last open bar. I got the three nights of accommodation for free because of the mistake the management had made and I hadn't had dinner yet, so my daily budget allowed me a well-deserved beer. And that's all I got: a beer in a plastic cup while the corner bar lowered its doors.

I heard distant laughter and could see a group of people gathered around a corner two blocks away. It was 3 am, I had given up on finding something to eat and had walked so far that my sleep was gone. I thought I could find someone to chat with until I decided to sleep.

I came around that corner and the drunk group of people was complaining that the bar had just closed too. I made my way back thinking that day would get a few lines from my gratitude journal.

I thought about what I'd write. "I woke up alive. I made it to Florence. I took a safe trip and had money left for about three beers, but even that I couldn't get." Just then I looked across the street and saw a boy lying on the bench in a small square. Leaning against a traveler's backpack, his face was covered in a dark T-shirt and beside him a sweeper swept the leaves of the gutter.

My eyes were full of tears. I began to imagine myself there and knew that I couldn't sleep peacefully in that situation. I'd be afraid of someone stealing from me. And because I'm a woman, I can't describe the other worse things that crossed my mind. I began to thank for my dirty kitchen so much that I felt ready to write a whole book thanking for that day.

I joined the two chairs that were similar in height and, covered by the bath towel, fell asleep happily for having a safe roof for the night.

After that, the three days in Florence were much lighter. I walked all over the center two days in a row. The city really is an open-air Renaissance museum. I saw a concert at Piazza della Signoria, Michelangelo's David at the Academy Gallery, the Duomo di Firenze Church, the Medici Chapel and a rock performance at Ponte Vecchia.

I was supposed to have stayed in Florence only for two days, but I took the last free night's accommodation to oversleep and then visited the central market before leaving for Rome by train.

37 – LIKE A CHILD

In Rome, I made peace with my wishes. I accepted that all I wanted was to be there, stopped thinking that chance drove me, and took responsibility for my choices. Being there was a consequence of my will, even if it was unconscious.

After each new hostel that I arrived, I thought it was the worst of the entire trip. The Florence hostel was dirty in the common areas, but the bed was good and the room was clean. Of course, to save money, I didn't look at the reviews very much when I booked. I chose the best room from the cheapest ones.

The two brothers who ran the hostel in Rome were Egyptian immigrants. A little too kind to women, in my opinion. They never insinuated themselves to me at all, because I was probably extremely reserved, but they treated the other guests who had been there for a long time with such an intimacy that I thought was exaggerated.

I arrived at the place at dinner time and one of the brothers was in the kitchen with two other girls from Turkey. He chewed and talked with his mouth open and I couldn't accept the food he offered me, even though I was hungry after the trip. I went to the MCDonalds I had seen around the corner and had a 3 euro salad.

When I came back, I shared a bottle of wine that Conor had left with me in Lake Garda with them, but we talked little. The girls spoke Turkish to each other and the brothers also spoke to each other in another language. I just noticed the guys staring at the girls and their defensive attitude to a few English sentences the men had said. "You could be my wife and live here for free" was one that bothered me.

Before falling asleep, I took a look at Rome's map and made a list with the places I could go on my first day. Paying less than 10 euros for the bed, I certainly wasn't close to the center, but there was a subway station two blocks away.

I opened the Couchsurfing app for events where I could meet travelers and there was a dozen messages from Italian guys asking me out. I didn't read any. But before deciding not to stay on the platform here in Rome, I had made a brief contact with a 29-year-old photographer who was one of the first Italians to offer me a room. I had considered accepting it before the avalanche of offers, but I refused it eventually. That night, a message from him with his phone number:

- Even if you still wanted to, I wouldn't be able to host you anymore, Paula, because a girl from Russia just confirmed it. Anyway, we'll go out for a few beers with friends and you are welcome to join us. Enjoy the city.

The next morning, as I walked all distracted from the Spanish Square to the Fontana Di Trevi, I walked through the streets without paying much attention to what I was seeing. Suddenly, I started to hear the noise of water from Italy's most famous fountain and stopped. I was in Rome for the first time in my life and was walking around the city as if I were walking through my neighborhood in Curitiba.[11] No curiosity, no wonder. That felt very wrong to me.

So I decided to get ready to see the Fontana for the first time. I took a deep breath and looked for the images I had of that place in my mind. Like most of the people who are interested in traveling, I had seen a lot of pictures of that place and had an idea of what it looked like, but I knew it would be different when I actually saw it. What would I find? Would it disappoint me? Would I be impressed?

I walked down a narrow alley called Via della Stamperia and on my right side I could already see the Poli Palace, whose façade has the largest baroque fountain in Italy. Walking in the shade, I avoided looking sideways until I felt the sun on me again. The noise of the water grew louder with the buzz of tourists, until I saw the imposing statue of the Ocean in the center of the fountain.

I was more than impressed. The Trevi Fountain is much larger than I could imagine after so many photographs. The details, the color of the water, the way it occupies the whole façade of the building, the allegories. Everything was so stunning for me. I leaned against a sideboard and stood there for a few minutes, staring at everything. As I watched the statue of the Abundance, I almost knelt down. Beautiful with her hand in her basket full of love, money, wisdom and everything my heart could desire.

I felt like a child watching everything curiously all over again. The guards blew their whistles as tourists climbed the benches and fountain structures trying to get a different photograph.

I sat in front of the Abundance and put my hand in the water. I felt the temperature and remembered my mother. She'd be very happy to visit Rome. I thanked silently, took a coin and threw it back. "I want to be genuinely happy." It worked when I made the same wish in the New Year's, although I didn't think that was what I was getting 15 days later, when I took off my wedding ring.

I walked in front of the Pantheon and spent a few more euros on a delicious Italian ice cream. By the way, tasting ice cream in Italy is a big risk for those who like ice cream. I could never find another ice cream so tasty anywhere else in the world.

I arrived at Piazza Navon late afternoon. I walked through the three fountains and got that wonderful feeling of peace and quiet that I always feel when I walk at sunset. I'd like to translate the physical sensation that runs through my body. The tranquility that dominates

me. It is happiness in its deepest essence.

A string quartet performed next to one of the three fountains and I had the perfect soundtrack for the happiest time of the day.

I sat facing the musicians and let myself be invaded by that indescribable sensation. I wish I could feel that 24 hours a day. Nothing in the world matters when I'm in this trance. There are no problems, no fears, no tomorrow or yesterday. It's wholeness and that's it.

After listening to about six or seven songs, I wrote a post on Instagram to remember that moment and noticed a look searching mine. I knew he wanted an excuse to approach me, but I was very well accompanied by myself. I pretended not to notice and kept watching everything with my peripheral vision. I didn't want anyone to enter my perfect world right now, but that stranger was already inside. It was impossible to ignore the annoyance he caused me.

Not Italians, I thought. I was fed up with their flirtatious behavior and malicious glances.

Tall, light-haired in a medium cut and wearing pants and button-down shirt with the sleeves folded. I could tell he was still staring. When the lady in the flowered dress left my side, he took her place immediately. I crossed my legs to the opposite side and started looking at the phone. If it were possible I'd have turned my back.

Then he leaned over and asked me the time in English. I answered looking at the watch on his wrist.

- That was a little ridiculous, wasn't it? I'm Carlos. I could say my watch isn't working, but I'm actually looking for a way to talk to you. What's your name? – He said holding out his hand.

We started a formal conversation. He asked where I was from and what brought me to Italy. I just said that I was on vacation and he said he was from Milan and was in Rome for a professional meeting. I tried to show that I didn't want to keep the conversation flowing, but I didn't want to be rude, because he was being very polite.

Uncomfortably, I kept saying yes to everything he proposed. A drink at the restaurant across the square and a walk to the Vatican to observe the millimeter-calculated position of Michelangelo's columns and statues. Luckily, he had a business dinner that very night before heading back to Milan. Cleverly, he asked me to write down his phone number and text him so he could save mine. If he had just asked for mine I'd have made up any number.

He said he'd try to get rid of his professional appointment as soon as possible to meet me before he went to the airport, but I was thanking all the saints in Italy, because if he invited me to dinner right then, I wouldn't know how to refuse it, even though that was my only wish. He got into a taxi and I walked to Castel Sant'Angelo, disturbed

by my difficulty in saying no.

Why? How hard is it to refuse anything that makes me uncomfortable? I could've been polite as soon as he introduced himself and said I'd rather be alone.

A young girl played the violin between a bridge and the castle and I felt at peace again. I stared at a waning moon in the blue sky saying farewell to the lilac that the last rays of sunlight had left on the horizon and abandoned those questions.

When I was able to access the internet, I had two messages on WhatsApp. Carlos said he was delighted to meet me and asked me to meet him at 8pm in front of the Pantheon. Couchsurfing's Matteo gave me an address near where I was. "We're drinking beer in this bar. My Russian guest is here too. "

I thanked Carlos for the invitation, but I said I had already made another appointment. I put the directions of the bar on the map and left to meet the unknown photographer and his Russian friend.

Another old, lighted maze full of little tables and flowerpots. A perfect place to get lost in Italy. When I arrived at the address, several groups were chatting happily holding glasses of craft beer in their hands.

It was a very fun night, even though I didn't have a penny for beer.

38 – THE PAIN IN SAYING NO

I spent the day visiting the Palatine Hill and the Colosseum and then we met, Matteo and I, in the late afternoon, on the same bridge near Castel Sant'Angelo. He drove me to a large square where a curious line of people awaited to look through the lock of a huge blue-painted wooden gate. We stood in line while he hoped I wasn't disappointed by the secret that keyhole would reveal.

When it was our turn, he looked first to make sure the light was still good.

I looked through the keyhole and was surprised by the vault of St. Peter's, distant, illuminated by the colors of the sunset and set in a beautiful garden. It was impossible to capture that image with the camera on my cell phone, so I looked very closely, hoping that mental photograph would never get out of my memory. I'd like to paint that canvas, but the colors of my mind aren't the same as my eyes could see.

Matteo thought of an incredible tour for that night. We watched the sunset from a tree-filled belvedere with only a few tourists and had dinner in a garden on the banks of the Tiber River. We drank wine and he told me about his work as a photographer. After dinner he invited me to his house and I found myself faced with the challenge of saying no.

Quietly, I reminded him of what I had already said in our message exchange. I accepted the invitation to go for a walk with him, but nothing else would happen between us. He insisted once more and it pissed me off, not at his insistence, but at my difficulty in saying no.

In Rome I was much more aware that saying no to men was a big challenge for me. Realizing the feelings that overwhelmed me when someone insisted on a yes from me was disturbing. It wasn't clear yet what led me to violate my will and always say yes, but it was the beginning of an important process.

39 – FISHING AND THE NECESSARY GOODBYE

I traveled for 25 hours on a Flixbus bus to return to Germany. I climbed all over Italy and went through the beautiful snowy mountains in Switzerland until I reached Frankfurt, where I faced another 2 hours trip by train to the tiny Bingen am Rheim, my friend Michael's home, Mika.

A co-worker of his picked me up by car at the train station and dropped me off at the apartment. Mika was on a business trip and would arrive the next day. I took a long shower and, exhausted, I fell asleep immediately. I slept more than 12 hours straight and woke up to the feeling that I was even more sleepy than before bedtime.

When Mika arrived in the late afternoon, we went for a walk in a park around the Rhine. He took his fishing gear and the intention was that we could fish our dinner. We talked a lot and I told him the whole story of the divorce. Mika met Felipe and was perplexed by the plot. I was no longer angry, but I hadn't resignified everything within me yet. It was a story from my past that I could tell without emotion but it still affected me. I didn't like people to see my Felipe as a villain, because every villain has a victim and I definitely didn't think I was a victim anymore. So, I even avoided giving him too many details.

Without fish, we went to the supermarket and I cooked our dinner that night and the others that came. We had beer on the porch and the German taught me how to roll a tobacco cigarette.

The apartment was small. Just one bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and balcony. He made a camping bed next to the window and we slept in the same space. Every morning I woke up to the smell of fresh coffee in the German flag-colored mug. I made scrambled eggs and Mika went to work. I did the dishes, meditated, and went for a walk around the town.

Every day he taught me how to fish during sunset, but none of us could catch anything but little minnows. That was the reason for a lot of laughter and a bit of disappointment on his part, trying to convince me that he was a great fisherman by showing me pictures of huge fish. I never doubted his talent and sometimes I even thought it was my energy that didn't contribute to such a catch actually happening.

We went for walks in the main parts of Bingen on weekends and talked a lot about the amazing trips he made before settling in Germany again. He got a ride on a catamaran from Brazil to the Caribbean and told me inspiring stories of his trips around the world

and that there are endless possibilities for those who want to explore unknown places.

One day before I left, I exchanged my last messages with Conor.

- Things are cold between us. Am I wrong?

- I'm still in London, I've worked a lot.

- I will be honest with you and I expect the same from you. The days we spent together were very special, but I know we drifted apart. I don't like what I'm feeling right now. When you say you're busy, I don't know if you're really busy or just making an excuse. If you want to stop talking to me, please be clear and I'll never send you another message.

- This is very difficult for me. You're an amazing woman, but you have all this travel ahead. I want you to finish it because I know it's important to you, but I can't wait.

- Thank you for understanding how important this is to me. None of us can promise to wait.

- I think the same. I'm afraid of losing a special person, but I feel we have no other choice.

- I feel the same and I'm sorry for both of us. Goodbye.

40 – FINDING HAPPINESS

I arrived in Frankfurt feeling renewed. I gained confidence and energy by taking a well-defined route to Portugal through Switzerland and Spain. I easily found my host's address and I confess that I only accepted his offer because he said he shared the rent with another woman.

He sounded like a nice guy in the app, but personally he was a weird guy I couldn't quite understand.

The apartment was very clean and tidy and the room where I'd sleep was large, well lit and there were keys in the door, which made me feel more peaceful. The windows give access to a nice big balcony where I smoked my two cigarettes a day, one in the morning and one in the evening.

I arrived before lunch, left my backpacks, and went for a walk around the neighborhood. The city had a vibrant atmosphere and gave me the impression of being much larger than it really was. From my host's apartment to downtown it was just over two kilometers, and I was glad to know that I wouldn't have to spend on public transportation.

I walked down a huge tree-lined avenue, crossed one of the bridges over the Main River, and got to the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's house.There,I decided I'd dive into the city's museums. In the middle of the afternoon, my host sent a message inviting me to have dinner in a beer garden. I didn't feel like meeting him, but this sort of thing is part of the Couchsurfing experience. Besides, he was hosting me for free and it wouldn't be polite of me to refuse it.

We met in front of the building at 7 pm and walked to the place he had planned to go. It was literally a garden, with wooden tables set under the trees of what looked like a park or a neighborhood square. We ordered a traditional dish whose name I can't remember.

Sharing moments with those who offer accommodation is very interesting because it's an opportunity to learn more about the genuine culture of the place, the habits of the community and also visit non-touristy spots. This garden was one of those spaces. A simple kiosk run by a German family and visited only by residents of that neighborhood.

I'm pretty sure we were the only people speaking English. The conversation went smoothly, except for the moment he wanted to share with me his love affairs with a Mexican guest. I answered with monosyllables, not knowing exactly what he wanted by telling me that story. It was clear that I was embarrassed and not interested at all. So

he let the conversation die.

I walked miles in Frankfurt. I took a guided walking tour to get to know the city's history and I was surprised to learn that almost 80% of the buildings were destroyed by bombing during World War II.

Frankfurt has a futuristic style, with mirrored skyscrapers and modern museums. Most of the buildings with some older architecture are a replica of the bomb-ravaged buildings. At first glance, it seems like a megacity, but Germany's financial center has less than 800,000 inhabitants.

On my last day, Simon took me to have breakfast, which was practically lunch in a hotel downtown. In the afternoon I'd do nothing at my favorite place in Frankfurt: the Main River shore.

It was a sunny Saturday and I laid my shirt on the grass near the Eiserner Steg, the famous iron bridge built in the late 19th century. I spent all afternoon watching the rowers roaming the river and the movement of locals and tourists. I felt the bright sun burning my skin and wondered how happiness is accessible when we search it within ourselves.

Less than six months ago I was suffering and desperately trying to continue a marriage that no longer brought me that sense of peace that I found there, sunbathing on the grass. You might say to me, "It's easy to find happiness in Europe," but I say it's not as simple as it sounds.

To be honest, most of my days in Europe were confusing and anxious. The sudden end of my marriage brought back the racing heartbeat. The same physical agony in my chest from when my father passed away. And that continuous throbbing sounded like an anchor pinning me to Casarão de Santa Teresa,[12] where Felipe and I had our last argument.

These moments of peace and serenity, like the one I had that Saturday afternoon in Frankfurt, brought some relief to my chest. It was impossible to forget that this anchor was there, but I realized that the happy moments depended on my actions. The more beautiful experiences I lived on the trip, the more I recognized my own work to find them and this encouraged me to keep looking for them. I found peace and happiness in the simplest moments when I finally concentrated on myself and thanked myself for my own efforts in giving myself those gifts.

When night came, my host offered to drive me to the bus station.

I found nothing like a bus terminal. It was a large block full of rubbish on the streets and with the names of companies in pieces of paper on the posts. I spent almost half an hour trying to find a FlixBus to Zurich sign. I found one that only indicated the time. I asked a young man in the place if he knew the destination of that stationary

bus, but he was as lost as I was.

As the driver approached, we found out that our bus stop wasn't there and we ran off. It was time for the bus to leave and I thought I'd miss it.

There was a group of passengers waiting on the sidewalk, all trying to go to Zurich, but no one was sure if the bus stops was really there. There was no place where we could get information and I chose to stay with those people even though I was unsure of anything. If I missed the bus, I wouldn't do it alone, I thought.

After about 40 minutes, a man in FlixBus uniform finally showed up, informing us that our vehicle was late and would arrive in 10 minutes. We boarded almost an hour and a half later and I left thinking that Brazil really isn't the only country in the world where some things work in the "fuck off" mode.

41 – IT'S ALL RIGHT

Sitting in the shade of a tree on Lindenhofplatz, I opened my mood journal and started writing down all the words that came to mind. The conversation I had the day before, when I arrived in the capital of Switzerland, messed up my feelings and I couldn't be sure of what I was feeling.

I had landed in Zurich at 6 am and stayed at the bus station, leaning against my backpacks for over 3 hours, waiting for my host's confirmation, Antonio, to knock on the door.

The old apartment was dirty, but at least I'd have a room of my own. The bed was messy and it was obvious that the sheet hadn't been changed. I covered the bed with my sarong and remembered once again how useful it would've been to carry a sleeping bag with me.

Antonio, a Chilean show-off who had lived in Zurich for over ten years, was very friendly and respectful. He opened the door at about 11am and hurried off to work, leaving a copy of the key with me.

I was exhausted from traveling all night by bus, but before going to bed, I grabbed a pair of rubber gloves that I found next to the washing machine and cleaned up the bathroom a little before taking my shower. I needed a relaxing shower before bed and a barefoot shower without the risk of slipping into the grubby bathtub would already be like a luxury spa.

I slept for about 2 hours and went out to meet Antonio in the cultural space he maintains with his Argentinian friend and business partner called Nicolás.

I followed the location he sent me and found the multicolored big house hidden in the back of a building. The large space had a stage covered in a grimy green carpet, a small grandstand, and scattered tables, chairs, and armchairs. The furniture was a mixture of styles, as if it had come from many different houses and times. Along with the color of the walls and the bright red of the curtains, it gave the house a strangely warm air. The place wasn't luxurious, and a wooden counter in front of two small white fridges held the beer crates that would be sold over the weekend.

The house was empty and only one of the tables had the chairs on the floor. There were a few empty bottles, an open smoke pack, and a large ashtray on the table. The smell of cigarette smoke on the curtains and carpet mingled with the smell of fermented malt from the empty beer bottles accumulated near the bar.

Nicolás, Antonio's partner, was a handsome Argentinian with long, curly hair. As soon as we greeted each other, I realized that he was very affectionate. They were talking about his latest

disappointment in a relationship and asked if I didn't mind if they continued the matter. I said I could come back later if it was too personal, but Nicolás said he'd like to hear an opinion of a woman. Then we started a deep conversation about human behavior in love relationships.

It was inevitable to tell them a little of my story. And, though I realized that I could finally see the lessons that not only divorce but also, and most importantly, 14 years of marriage taught me, remembering the past always made me feel uncomfortable. Deep down, I was still running away from those emotions.

My new Argentinian friend was sorry that his beloved girl had broken up with him and was already going out with another guy. He had bumped into her and her new lover that morning and he was devastated asking me: "How could she have lied so much? Just over a month ago she said she loved me ".

- She probably still loves you, but in a different way. You certainly didn't stop being important in her life, but she has the right to move on without you. In fact, she has the right to move on with whoever she wants, alone, with you, or with someone else.

That moment, I was telling myself this was the most important lesson I learned: nobody belongs to anyone. No one is obligated to be with anyone out of pity, consideration, respect or any other moral obligation. This isn't love, it's prison.

The words were so obvious, but why were they so hard to put into practice? I sympathized with Nicolás' pain, for I myself was still not coping well with imagining someone taking a place that was mine for more than a decade.

Pain, fear, guilt, judgment, disapproval, separation, distance, weight, difficult, time, hurry. These were the words that came to my mood journal that morning, sitting in the Lindenhof square in Zurich. I let myself cry even without knowing exactly why.

After a few minutes of watching a group of young ladies play bocce, the tears had dried and I looked back at those words in the journal. So I chose a positive word for each of those sensations and emotions. Peace, courage, love, freedom, faith, strength, will, resilience, ease, perseverance. And I wrote down some positive statements using all these words.

The source of drinking water made a quiet little noise and I was blinded by the rays of sun that pierced the treetops. I closed my eyes and searched carefully for the song of some bird and the sound of the wind waving the leaves. I closed my journal and said quietly: "It's all right".

42 – NO ONE DIES OUT OF LOVE

The single bed was well stretched and covered with a blue sheet that smelled of lavender. The soft light of the lamp on the white table looked like a welcome sign, even though the clock near the headboard showed 1:30 am. The first night in Barcelona I lay down full of gratitude.

Pauline was like a mirror sent by the universe. Same age, same profession and same emotional needs as me. Our connection was instant and we went out together every night. She, who offered me three nights, ended up letting me stay the five days of my stay in Barcelona in that cozy little room.

The living room had a couch covered with a red velvet cover, a round dark wooden table, and two antique-looking chairs. The huge shuttered door overlooked a small balcony where Pauline cultivated various vases of foliage and herbs. In the morning, barefoot on the cold red floor, I could smell mint and basil as I watched the quiet street and had pure, unsweetened coffee.

I can't say what made me feel so good in Barcelona. My hostess was awesome. My room was amazing. That little balcony was amazing. The whole city was amazing. I liked the architecture, the sea air and, especially, the weather in the morning and dusk. A cool breeze accompanied me on the sidewalk as I listened to the trade opening its doors for another day of work.

Pauline and I would meet every day in the late afternoon and she'd take me to her favorite places. Drinking a clear, beer-soda mix, we talked about journalism, politics, and relationships. Law of attraction also entered our agenda.

On the last day, I took a train and went to the beach. I was feeling as light as my last day in Trancoso, Bahia. To my surprise, when I reached the sand I saw a small stage from which I could hear a Hindu mantra. I smiled to myself like it was a coincidence planned by the stars.

I was indecisive about getting close to the stage, watching the mantra festival, or lying by the sea.

I ended up with the second option. I put my sarong on the sand, facing the waves and focused on listening to some soft music coming from the shore.

I noticed that almost all the women around me were topless. Even two grandmothers who talked happily with their feet in the water. One with both hands on her hips seemed not to mind the group of boys sitting under a parasol just ahead.

I already knew that topless is a common practice among Spanish

women, but all that naturalness made me feel kind of strange. However, I wanted to try going topless without feeling judged.

I looked around a few times to be sure. I counted eight women with their breasts on show and, pretending to be natural, pulled the stripe that tied the bikini top to my back.

I confess that the first few minutes were challenging. I don't even like to sleep without wearing anything on top. To wear a blouse without a bra underneath, only if I'm home alone. Imagine being like this, exposed on the beach? But now it was late. I kept pretending to be used to it and put on the sunglasses, which gave me the strange feeling of being less naked.

After looking at the reaction of people walking in front of me,under my sunglasses, I began to feel more comfortable. Another 30 minutes and I had the courage to get up, walk on the sand and dive into the sea. I had an almost involuntary reflex of covering my breasts with my hands as I went back to my sarong place. Before that happened, I pulled my hair out with my hands and twisted it over my shoulders to get the excess water out, so my arms gave me as little coverage as I needed until I was sure there was no audience interested in my nipples.

For a few minutes, I wondered why this was so natural for men and so hard for most women? Culture was one of the answers, since the Spanish women seemed very comfortable. But I had no doubt that female nipples are hypersexualized, even by ourselves. My shame wasn't for exposing my body, but for attracting malicious glances from men.

Already lying down, I turned my attention back to the festival mantras and let myself be rocked by the melody. I was so focused that I could feel the vibration of the music in the contact of my body with the sand. I ended up forgetting that I was half naked and traveled away from the beach. I can't say exactly where my conscience went. Maybe I dozed off. I'm not sure.

Completely free of shame, I asked a couple who were right behind me to take a look at my things. Barcelona is well known for the high incidence of pickpockets. I didn't know if the beaches had the same problem, but I preferred not to take a risk. Besides, I wanted to enjoy the sea bath better.

I got into the fat, calm waves and felt the cold water wet my uncovered breasts. How nice to be free of any judgment. I looked for memories of my last sea bath in Trancoso. I wanted to relive that inexplicable sense of gratitude and happiness. I thanked them for the beautiful stories I had built in the last four months since I left for Canada, and I forgave myself for falling in love with Jordan and also for allowing myself to live those days of romance with Conor in Italy.

I wondered how many things have happened since, drowned in tears and sobs, I took off my wedding ring that Monday afternoon in Rio de Janeiro. Putting all that has happened, I couldn't even blame myself. I, who even thought I'd never be able to get involved with anyone else, could only really thank myself. The world, after all, is not over. My father, after all, was right. No one dies out of love.

43 – AMNESIA AND SELF-FORGIVENESS

I opened my eyes and didn't recognize the ceiling above me. I blinked and my head was throbbing. Of course, hangover after Ushuaia, I thought. One of Ibiza's most famous ballads would surely leave its mark on my body already tired from the trip.

The bed was strangely more comfortable. I looked left and couldn't find the next bunk. There was a black glass door and clothes thrown over the white sideboard.

Goddammit! May my mother forgive me what I'm gonna tell you here, but this is the memory of my Back to Single Life Party. I myself created the term in English, but I didn't plan to forget the night. On the contrary, when I planned the fun party time with two Brazilian girls I met through Couchsurfing chat, I said it should be "memorable."

I was wearing my black lingerie and the Australian guy beside me wasn't completely naked either. It gave me some relief. If I couldn't remember how I got there, I wouldn't be able to put on my clothes after… well, you know.

I rushed to the bathroom to try to pick up any more signals from the night before. There was only one can of beer over the sink. My skirt was wrapped in the silk sheets next to Mitchell's white shirt. He woke up when I pulled my clothes off and I smiled, completely embarrassed.

- Good morning, is everything ok? – he asked rubbing his eyes.

- I hope you tell me yes. I can't remember much.

- Don't worry, nothing happened – he got up and kissed my head.

- Oh really? Don't I really need to worry?- I insisted.

- Yeah. You gave up and asked me to stop in the middle of the process and I'd never force anything – he reassured me with a gentle wink.

I called an Uber car and when I reached the apartment room, I looked out the window and saw from the balcony the pool and the huge butterfly that adorned the stage of Ushuaia. I ran down the stairs and had a flashback as I walked down the corridor. The smell of cigarettes and drinks brought back some memories of our arrival there. Nothing too important: crooked steps, laughter and a smelly cigar between my fingers as I slid my right hand up the wall. I still remember this image well.

I never knew how to smoke cigars. At every opportunity I had, always drenched in a lot of alcohol, I swallowed the thick smoke and

woke up with amnesia. At least my blackout was partially explained. The other part of the blame I put on the three-liter Belvedere vodka, which was available in the front row room. I thought my Back to Single Life Party deserved to break my promise to never drink vodka again. Big mistake.

In the car, on my way to the hostel, I recapitulated the night from the flower headbands we got at the entrance to Ushuaia before sunset. We danced a lot with a group of drunk and funny Italians on the edge of the stage, and when the first dj of the night performed we were near the pool. We took the only photos of the party and decided to buy our first drink.

I remembered the multicolored lights perfectly, the shredded paper showers, and the electronic music that vibrated all my pores in a way I had never allowed myself to feel before. I'm still not a big fan of electronic music, but I wished to be in Ibiza so much that I wanted to experience all the sensations.

My stomach twisted every time the car jolted. In the meantime, I was looking at the cell phone photos for some hint of what could have happened until the third or fourth glass of vodka with energy drink. Yes, I also remembered the price of the drinks. I can't believe I paid 14 euros on a Heineken long neck bottle yet. This is worth over 60 reais.[13]

It was after we bought our first and only beer that Alessandra prophesied:

- Calm down, girls. Soon we'll be rocking, enjoying the party in a front row room.

- Amen – I laughed – with these prices, I can't celebrate being single.

Mitchell approached us a few minutes after this dialogue. We were distracted and he arrived without us noticing.

- I want you in my room – he said, holding Alessandra and me, while Catia looked surprised at the other end of the triangle.

- Hi, how are you? Nice to meet you, my name's Alessandra! – My new friend said, breaking free of his muscular arms. At the same time, I bent down to escape that hug as well.

- I'm sorry – he walked away, clasping his hands in supplication – my name is Mitchell. I'm from Australia. And you?

- I'm Alessandra and these are Catia and Paula. We're Brazilian.

- Nice to meet you. I'd like to invite you to join me and my friend in our front row room.

As we walked to the room entrance, I warned Alessandra that his intention was to kiss one of us.

- I don't think anyone here will mind kissing him – she snapped, and I had to agree.

Mitchell was very tall. He was certainly over six feet. The white shirt was tight enough to reveal the broad shoulders and strong, well-rounded arms. Short blond hair, incredible blue eyes and a jovial smile. I guessed he was about 28 years old. But he was only 24.

We went into the room without any problems. Mitchell's friend was sitting on a white couch, receiving a neck massage and drinking. He looked completely crazy. We were introduced to him and a very friendly waiter served us a drink.

The VIP area was filled with comfortable white couches, black acrylic coffee tables and huge transparent buckets filled with ice and huge bottles of vodka and champagne, all lit with blue LED lights. Almost everyone in the rooms was wearing white, including our hosts. I figured that just like us, those who didn't wear white were guests.

As the DJs took turns in the pick-ups, alcohol intake increased on the track. I could remember the champagne toast I made with the girls before I ended up kissing Mitchell.

I met Alessandra at the Ibiza bus station and went on the bus for Formentera with her, where we said goodbye at the port. She had all her luggage and would spend a few days there. I rented a bike and cycled to Playa Illetes. The hangover and guilt seethed inside my head as I let my gaze be hijacked by the dazzling blue of the sea.

The rattle of the bicycle wheels on the dirt road made my brain throb. But I didn't think to stop. I reached the beach with my mouth drier than the Atacama Desert, but the only restaurant in the area sold the glass of mineral water for 3 euros. I ordered tap water, but the waiter said it wasn't drinkable. I paid 60 *reais* in 355ml of beer the night before, so I thought it was fair to pay almost 14 in 300ml of water, although it wasn't enough to quench my thirst.

I spent hours at the sea, plagued by guilt for losing control and consciousness the night before. I was lucky Mitchell was a nice guy. I tried to accept that the past was no longer in my control, but it was very hard to forgive myself for putting myself in that situation.

The most important memory of Back to Single Life Party is a mental note: fun with awareness. My future is made of my present choices.

44 – TAKING BACK CONTROL

Google Maps showed the subway station was disrupted that September morning. Throughout the day, I'd find out that many other stations were also closed. It seemed that all of Madrid was under construction.

All the hosts who offered me an accommodation on Couchsurfing lived far from the center, and I was rushing my trip through Spain to enjoy a few days of rest at a friend's house in Portugal.

I walked more than expected with my backpacks until I found the hostel where I'd spend the next two nights. I went up three floors, settled into a bed by the window, and sat there for an hour or so. Looking up at the ceiling, I talked to myself, still convincing myself that the night in the Ibiza party was left behind. I put on the headphones and played a meditation song.

As I controlled my breath, I assessed my mind with every inch of my body, starting with my toes. Flashbacks from the Ushuaia Hotel shone in my mind when my eyes were closed, taking me away from the present. When I realized I was rambling, I scanned my body again.

After 20 minutes of exercise, I took a shower and went for a walk around town aimlessly. The streets of Spain really won my heart. I happened to find a free walking tour from the Puerta Del Sol Square and decided to go with it.

Plaza Mayor, El Sobrino del Botin Restaurant, La Catedral de la Almudena, Palacio Real, La Osa and Madroño, until you return to Puerta del Sol, where the city's ground zero is located. During the tour, I met a Brazilian named Cínthia, who lived and worked in Ireland. We kept together for the rest of the afternoon.

I went back to the hostel when it was getting dark and again I enjoyed the sense of well-being that always overwhelms me as I walk at dusk. All the mistakes were left behind in those magical minutes and I felt great and happy again. How to put that sensation in a little pot to take it every hour? It felt like a carnival drug.

I took another shower, made sure my makeup was looking good, got into the same flowery dress of almost every night out and left to meet my new Brazilian friend. The hostel where she was staying organized a pub crawl almost every night. It cost 8 euros and gave access to four nightclubs with free shots in all of them. Before leaving, I said to myself: have fun without losing control.

On the way from bar to bar, I spoke briefly to the Colombian guy who was leading the group of young drinkers, and soon realized that this was a kind of job I could do, earning a percentage for every tourist who accepted my invitation to join the group. I saved the idea

for the next city and had fun.

The average age of the pub crawl group that night was between 20 and 24 years old. Nothing much different from the general age of the people in pubs we had already visited. Cynthia, 32, and I, 37, were some of the oldest people everywhere on the tour.

At the last nightclub, my Brazilian friend leaned up against the dark wall with a 19-year-old boy, in a kiss so hot, breathless, and full of hands that caught the eyes of everyone around. From a distance, I was watching and laughing at that Hollywood kiss in the sound of sensual reggaeton.

At that moment, a group of four boys was also having fun with the scene. Lucas, the most handsome of them, approached me smiling.

- I'm sorry, but I think you've lost your friend forever.

- I know. She surrendered to kindergarten – I joked.

- Yeah, she definitely went to the dark side – he said, looking back at the new couple who were practically devouring themselves on the wall. – You can join us if you want.

I approached the group and was introduced to the other three friends, whose age seemed to be more compatible with mine. Carlos, a skinny guy with curly hair and glasses, was getting married next week, and this was the night of his bachelor's party. I congratulated him and quickly turned my attention to Lucas.

Very short hair, trimmed beard, and green eyes that watched me with seductive attention. I hadn't noticed his presence at the bar until he came and talked to me, but the minute I looked into his eyes, I couldn't look away.

A literature professor, Lucas was interested as soon as I said I was starting to write a book about my trip. Our conversation flowed very well, when his friends said that they were going to another club. Before I could cover my disappointment, Lucas put his hand on my back and invited me to join them.

- Oh, come on. This isn't a bachelor's party you see in the movies, with women in costumes coming out of giant cakes – Carlos said, trying to convince me.

- I bet your friend won't even miss you – Lucas pointed at Cinthia, who continued her display of sensual kisses.

I was reticent about continuing the night. The conversation with Lucas was very interesting, but I wondered if it wouldn't be wise to go home. Three shots and two beers were good enough after the Ibiza blackout.

- I appreciate the invitation, guys, but I'll go back to my hostel. There's nothing for me to do here and I don't have the energy to continue the night with you. Time to go to bed.

The next evening I had dinner with Simone, my coach, who was

on vacation in Madrid with her husband and two friends. A delicious restaurant I could afford by planning my budget well before leaving Germany, I was allowed to enjoy it. Finally, I was able to travel with less than 30 euros a day.

I walked alone on that pleasant night. I walked on the streets randomly until I got sleepy and went back to the hostel for my last night in Madrid.

45 – RECONNECT AND REFLECTIONS

I went up the nice cobbled streets and waved to a lady who was watching the movement from the top of her yellow balcony. It was, once again, my perfect time of the day. The temperature in Lisbon was a little colder than the rest of Europe, and I could feel all the tranquility of another sunset again.

I left without a map that afternoon, looking for the Santa Luzia Viewpoint. I walked where my intuition sent me, asked for information, and ended up seeing the sun setting behind many small houses, on top of another very beautiful viewpoint, full of tables and a group of musicians playing bossa nova. Not sure if it was the Santa Luzia Viewpoint, Graça Viewpoint or any other I found on the way. The sky was already changing color and I didn't want to miss the show.

I leaned against the wall watching the sky go from bright orange to dark lilac and wrote all the good things that have happened to me since I left Ibiza in my gratitude journal. Because of anxiety and guilt, I hadn't written much in my gratitude journal and I felt that I needed to focus on the good things on my trip again.

Back to the hostel, I stood in the courtyard looking at the moon and enjoying the tranquility of my first night in Portugal.

Germany, Austria, Italy, Uruguay and Brazil talking about fine arts, music and the influence of synthetic drugs in the creative process of artists. It sounds like an academic name, but it was just a group of travelers drinking cheap wine while a weed cigarette was being passed among them. I joined the wine group and took part in the conversation long enough to realize that my English was better than I expected.

The next morning, I woke up early and meditated on the top floor. I bought eggs and fruits for my breakfast and started planning the next steps of the trip. My time in Europe was about to expire and I made a list of possibilities:

- Morocco and the opportunity to visit Africa before heading to Asia.

- Greece, The Balkans and finally Asia.

- Holland and France, to end the trip in Europe once and for all, then Asia.

- Return to Brazil.

Yes, going back to Brazil was on my list of possibilities. Before that, I started researching the cheapest route to get to Bangkok and going to a totally new and unknown continent started to make me afraid.

Going to Canada seemed challenging, but I had friends waiting for me there, and besides, I'd been to the United States before. I think things would be the same.

I was in Europe in 2015, of course in a completely different kind of trip, but that small experience gave me some confidence. But Asia was something completely unknown. I saw the movie "The Hangover" and thought I'd be lost forever in the chaos of Bangkok. I didn't think I'd have internet, I wouldn't be able to communicate with Asians, and I'd never find my way back home.

To get away from the anxiety, I closed the laptop and went for a meeting with Rachel in Chiado. Rachel is the critical reviewer of this book. We met when we worked together at Diário de Pernambuco,[14] in Recife when I was still a journalism student. She was already an experienced culture reporter, and I was still taking my first steps in the politics field. Although we worked in the same newsroom for a year, we never got close.

With the posts of the trip, we got closer talking online, and she offered to show me the city of Lisbon when I traveled through Portugal. And it was a pleasant surprise to know Rachel better.

I remembered the same joy and a contagious positive energy from when we worked in the newsroom. Easy laugh that came from within. I could feel her laughter in my own chest with every good story she told me. Even speaking of the troubles that the change of country brought to the whole family life, Rachel spoke with some motivating optimism.

Before meeting her at A Brasileira Café, one of the writer and poet Fernando Pessoa's[15] favorite places, I walked through the Chiado neighborhood to get to know the city's atmosphere. When Raquel arrived with two friends from Pernambuco who were also visiting Portugal, we took a drive and went to São Jorge Castle. We laughed together all afternoon until we said goodbye in the Se Cathedral.

Although Lisbon was the place where I met many friends from Brazil, I walked a lot on my own and began to realize that the continuous tightness in my chest wasn't a negative feeling, but just a physical feeling. With that, I was able to accept that I'd live with it as long as it took. It wasn't pain, fear, anxiety or anguish. It was just a chill in the chest that would go away one day.

I was able to connect with the city deeply and I was peaceful. The hostel was cheap and pretty decent and I ended up staying longer, four instead of two nights. I bought vegetables and some protein from the grocery store on the corner and used the free groceries from the travelers' cupboard for lunch and dinner. I shared the meals I cooked with other guests, and I was also invited to try their food at other

times.

I went out alone every day and visited the Jerónimos Monastery, Belém Tower, the Padrão dos Descobrimentos, the Carmo Convent Ruins, Bairro Alto and Alfama. I got to know the history of the 1755 earthquake and tsunami better, followed by many fires, they killed a third of the population. The tragedy changed the life in the country forever.

All that made me think nothing is permanent. I could imagine the despair of those people who fled the landslides and fires toward the Tagus River and found death anyway in the giant waves that swept the coast and rocked the tides of the world. They say that even the Brazilian coast felt the impact.

I started to enjoy making metaphors of the impactful stories of the places I knew with my personal history. As if I were looking for the messages from the universe wherever I visited.

In Lisbon, I thought of the afternoon of January 15, when I felt as if an earthquake and a tidal wave had hit me and destroyed all the certainties I had. A minute earlier, I was happy to hear the optimism of my doctor, one of Brazil's best human reproduction specialists. The next moment I was crying over the debris of my dreams.

Nothing is by chance, I forced myself to believe it. Portugal has reinvented its engineering and architecture in the way it builds houses. I was rebuilding my story and this was the opportunity to redo everything in a different way. I didn't know how yet, but I knew it was just up to me.

46 – RECONNECTION AND OLD QUESTIONS

I planned to spend two weeks in Cascais, where my friend Julia and her husband Cristiano, a retired Army colonel, live with their children. We met on my first military adventure with Felipe, in the Amazon, when he was still a lieutenant and we wore the wedding rings on our right hands.

Julia kept her almost hilarious sarcasm already known. A funny way to complain about things that always makes you wonder if she's really complaining or joking about the situation. Passionate about traveling, she had been following my trajectory over the internet and she already knew that Felipe and I were separated. But when I arrived, she wanted to know the details.

After Rondônia, we met many other times, even though we moved from city to city so many times. Northeast, Rio de Janeiro, Amazon again. Felipe and Cristiano had a good but respectful relationship because of their difference in military ranks. Julia and I always had intimacy, and even though we didn't talk often, we talked about very personal things when we met.

After so long, telling every detail of what happened to someone who met us as a couple was strange, but also familiar. I didn't want them to feel sorry for me, but when I thought about the full divorce story, before and after, I ended up moaning and wondering why the marriage ended.

Julia and Cristiano put a bet on us getting back together.

- I don't believe it, Julia – I said, looking for some certainty in the horizon – I can't say it's impossible, but I'm someone else now. Everything I've been in those 14 years with him has changed dramatically.

- Precisely for this. While you were traveling the world, he was spending his time reflecting… You never saw each other again. When you both meet again, it may be so much better – Julia tried to convince me.

- I agree. I think you'll get back together – Cristiano added to it.

That night I went to bed thinking about it. Was it still possible? Would we be willing to do that? Would he want that? Until I asked myself the correct question: Do I want that?

47 – GETTING TO KNOW MORE EMOTIONS

In Cascais, I decided to use my free time to definitely organize my next steps. And the conversation with Julia made me think about putting Brazil on my list of possibilities. I made another list of pros and cons to end the trip at that time and go back home. The list of pros was much longer and this made me suffer.

I took a shower imagining that the water was taking all my anguish away and went back to the room ready to take the next steps.

I sat on the bed with my legs crossed and meditated for 8 minutes. I didn't play any music or guided audio. I preferred to focus on the background noises and the sensations of my body. I knew the answer was inside my mind somewhere, and before taking a deep breath for the first time, I asked out loud: what do I want to do?

I was in deep silence, just watching the thoughts that were coming. Morocco, Brazil, Felipe, Oktoberfest in Munich, France, Greece. I let all these thoughts go like clouds. If I wasted too much time on any of these possibilities, I'd look at myself and say: It's not time to think now, it is time to silence. And then I looked for the sound of a bird singing, the whisper of the wind in the leaves, the engine of a distant car, or the sound of my own breath. I was consciously looking for the feeling of warmth on my skin or the feeling of my body touching the clothes and the bed.

When I finally opened my eyes, I grabbed my laptop and opened the airline tickets website. I researched prices for Bangkok from several different cities in Europe and stopped a few seconds after realizing that Brazil wasn't in the new searches at all.

I didn't want to go home, what I wanted was security. I was afraid of going to Asia and all those thoughts about the past connected me to the security I felt when I was still with Felipe. I finally realized I was just afraid of the unknown. I was afraid of the unknown of when I went to Canada and then Europe. Between security and happiness, I finally managed to choose happiness. With Felipe, I know I wouldn't find that anymore.

I bought a ticket from Istanbul, Turkey, to Thailand. I'd be traveling at the end of the month and now I needed to find a way to get to Turkey before my visa in the Schengen Area expired.

I had applied for some jobs in Greece and I also signed up to a boat ride website suggested by Mika, my German friend. But I had received no response from any of my applications.

So, I chose the same method used to get from Canada to Europe

and typed in the search engine “from Portugal to anywhere”. The cheapest ticket out of Portugal was to a small town next to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. I thought I could go from there to the south of France and then take a flight somewhere in eastern Europe before going to Turkey.

I woke up pleased with the changes I had made in my life the night before, but everything changed at a scary speed, even before I could say good morning to Julia and Cristiano.

After meditating, I opened my inbox and the Worldpackers app had sent me a notification from a hostel in Corfu, a Greek island near Albania. They were interested in my expertise with social media management and wanted me to go there the same week.

I told Julia about it at the breakfast table and she said she would go for it without thinking twice. I was also in the mood to go, but the ticket to the Netherlands had already been purchased from a low cost airline, with no refund. Also, I had already checked the prices for tickets from Portugal to Corfu, and they were discouraging. Adding the amount I had already spent in the ticket from the Netherlands, I’d be paying almost 500 reais only on tickets.

I went back to my room and started checking all the routes to Greece. The only option at that time was by plane. I did so much research that I ended up buying a ticket to Corfu from Porto, not Lisbon. That meant I had to find a way to get to Porto before 6 pm the next day and I was about 4 hours away.

I booked a ride through BlaBlaCar and shortened my stay in Cascais. I didn’t understand why I was trying so hard to go to Greece. It wasn’t the job opportunity of my life, it wasn’t an island I dreamed of going to, and economically, it wasn’t that advantageous, especially after I got to the airport and had to pay another 50 euros to check my luggage that was overweight for the cabin.

The good part so far was the opportunity to get to know two cities along the way: Porto in Portugal, where I spent 4 hours exploring the center, and Athens in Greece, where I had a 12-hour connection.

The adventure of this real expedition to arrive on my first exchange job was due to my backpack, which had the two straps broke in Athens centre. To save 10 euros from the airport locker, I had to carry 15 kilos and I felt like I was holding a baby on my walk.

48 – THE GUILT OF SAYING YES

The first day of work at Isadora's house, the hostel's partner, had been a quiet one, although I found it a little uncomfortable that she asked me to pick up the toys scattered around the room, tidy up the children's beds, and fold the pile of scattered clothes, which I couldn't be sure if they were clean or dirty.

I did the housework in a few minutes, not quite understanding how that could be useful, since the house needed a real cleaning and organizing task force.

I worked more hours than expected on the contract making a new Instagram page for the new guesthouse they were rebuilding and made a photo bank of the island and the new B&B that could be used for future posts.

It was a tiring day, especially after travelling in the last two days. The hostel profile on the volunteer site said free drinks for the volunteers and I was already on my second draft beer.

The main bar was right next to reception. A pink room with white curtains, wooden tables and straw chairs. Luís, a nice Portuguese with beautiful eyes was my company while guests and staff interacted after dinner. Behind the oval counter, a TV on the wall showed Queen clips, and an Australian guy with a funny smile delivered suspicious shots in bright red and fluorescent green.

I was already getting uncomfortable with the way Luis looked at me and was looking for a way out of the corner where he practically isolated me. Everyone talked to each other, toasted and played cards. I also wanted to be part of it.

We were on the wide and leafy balcony, and before I could make an excuse to enter the bar, Luis stared at me and he was more direct than I expected.

- I don't want to scare you, but I really feel like kissing you.

I smiled nervously, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. Then I took a deep breath and pulled his hand away from my left arm.

- Look, Luis, I don't want to kiss anyone, all right? There's nothing wrong with you. I'm fine on my own and I want to keep being like this – I explained carefully trying not to hurt him.

- Calm down, I'm not talking about a relationship. We can just have fun tonight. We're getting along right here. – He insisted sounding pretentious because he thought I was talking about a serious relationship.

- I'm not talking about a relationship either. I mean, right now I'm having fun on my own – I explained gently.

- Sure. I'm sorry if I bother you. I needed to try at least. – He

looked down with an upset expression.

- Don't worry. I'll grab another beer so we can forget this situation – I said, trying to break the ice.

I spoke to Luís again so that he wouldn't think I was upset with him, but when I thought everything was clear between us, he insisted again.

- Are you sure you don't even want to kiss me? Maybe you'll like it? We have nothing to lose – He said, looking at my lips.

- Please don't make things difficult for me. I don't want you to be upset – I said, turning my head to the side.

I knew I didn't want to kiss him. I already knew myself well enough to know that if I really wanted to kiss him, I'd have made a move already.

I looked around the room looking for someone who could get me out of that situation. I was feeling bad because I thought I'd hinted that he had a chance with me.

I didn't want to go to bed yet, but I didn't want to be near that inconvenient Portuguese either. There were no familiar faces around the bar though.

I had been in the hostel for less than 24 hours and I had only talked to Luís and a Brazilian girl called Luana, who was also a volunteer and gave me some tips the night before, when I arrived from the airport. I took a look at the tables and couldn't find my Brazilian friend. After the fourth glass of draft beer, I might not remember exactly what her face looked like.

- Please, just a kiss. It seems we're getting on well, we're laughing and having fun. Come on, just a kiss – he insisted again, with a saddened look.

It was a reasonable kiss, but I felt bad for going against my will. I made it clear to him that the next day things would be the same as before. Luis agreed and I stayed there for just a few more minutes until I went to my room.

He asked to follow me and insisted that we went to his room first. I gave in once more and I felt even worse. Why couldn't I just say no and impose my will?

In the balcony, he started trying to kiss me again and wanted to warm things up between us no matter what. I thought he was manipulating me and got so angry that I had to put an end to that.

- Luis, get away from me. I didn't even want to kiss you, but you insisted and I gave in. I also said I didn't want to come here, but I gave in again, even against my will – I said. I was angry and he was trying to hug me to calm me down – Don't touch me anymore! – I shouted. – I will no longer give you the chance to keep persuading me to do things I don't want to. I'll go to my room right now, because I've

already done too many things I didn't want to for today. Good night.

I left in a hurry without listening to his arguments and apologies. I got into my room furious with myself for allowing it all. I brushed my teeth and my tongue really angry. I wanted to erase that kiss from my mind forever, but my desire was to take the guilt I was feeling out of my mind. Once again I wanted to go back to the past and undo everything, but I was too drunk to convince myself that going back wasn't possible.

Lying on the bunk bed, staring at the moonlight through the small window in front of me, I began to spin the japa mala in my hand repeating a self-forgiving mantra, and I fell asleep before finishing half of it.

49 – A PORTUGUESE NIGHTMARE

I arrived at the breakfast buffet a little late. I recognized Luana, my Brazilian friend, sitting at a table with a cup of coffee at the end of the room. The restaurant was in front of the sea and was lit by the sunlight reflecting off the water. It was a beautiful day and that gave the place a touch of Hollywood glamour.

I spotted Luis sitting at one of the front tables and pretended I didn't see him. I poured my coffee and sat at the table with Luana, who was about to collect the dishes from the serving line. I started to ask some rules about the volunteers' code of conduct. It was my first job in exchange for accommodation and I wanted to make sure I was acting right.

Suddenly, Luana gave a serious look over my shoulder and her tone changed completely. Before I turned to find out what it was, Luis surprised me with a kiss on the mouth.

- Good Morning. Are you alright? – He sat down, a cup of coffee in his hands.

- I'm not sure – I said, with my lips tight not to return the kiss, and with a confused face. Luana and I looked at each other with a strange complicity. I wanted to tell her that this was a mistake, but I was too confused by his behavior. What was the part he didn't understand last night? Wasn't I clear enough about wanting nothing more from him? – Shouldn't you be working already? – I asked with a disapproval tone he didn't seem to notice.

- Yes, since 7:30, but I wanted to wait for you to say good morning.

I was feeling sick and it had nothing to do with the hangover or the cereals in front of me. I didn't know what to do to get rid of Luis. I felt an urge to be rude to him, but I didn't want to be unpleasant or make him uncomfortable in front of Luana.

I was silent and just turned my body over to my friend and kept asking what volunteers could and couldn't do in that liberal hostel.

I noticed Luana was very formal dealing with Luís. He, on the other side, didn't leave me alone until I finished my coffee and followed me along the 122 steps that connected the beach restaurant to the main street, where the hostel reception was and also Isadora's house, where I worked.

- I got your WhatsApp number yesterday. I'll send you a message to meet you when our work is over – he said, trying to give me another kiss.

I, who was completely silent along the way, kept being like this. I answered nothing and didn't move, but neither did I return the kiss. I

turned my back and followed my path scared with myself. I urgently needed to understand why I was stuck and couldn't simply say no. Although I was clear when I left his room the night before, something wasn't right with him either. Maybe I hadn't been clear enough.

50 – MEETING ANOTHER MOTHER

As usual, Isadora asked me to make the beds and arrange the clothes scattered around the house before starting work on social networks and reservation websites.

The mess in the house seemed to increase every day, but I started to see it as something cultural. My manager complained a lot about almost everything and sometimes was quite aggressive in the way she spoke to me. I always answered everything very politely. I was absolutely certain that I was doing my best, doing things that weren't my duty as a volunteer and working longer hours than I was supposed to. When she seemed to lose her temper and was harsh on me, I'd say to myself: "This isn't mine. Then I won't carry it. "

That same afternoon, I had been working for over 6 hours without stopping for lunch. Solon, Isadora's husband, was sitting on the couch watching TV and they were talking about something in Greek that I was unable to understand. At the same time, she was telling me in English the room prices for the upcoming summer season.

I didn't ask anything not to interrupt the conversation. When I stopped typing, she'd turn to me and call for the next room. At one point, I realized that their conversation had changed, and I continued in awkward silence, staring at the computer screen. When she finally asked me which one was next, I didn't have time to answer.

- Get out of here, Paula. I can't finish this now. Tomorrow or later, we'll continue – she shouted, pointing a finger at the front door.

I noticed Solon trying to catch my reaction or waiting for me to answer back, but I acted so calmly that it surprised both him and myself. I just mentally repeated that it wasn't with me.

I closed the laptop, that was on my lap, and placed it quietly on the coffee table. I gathered my notebook, my phone, and my computer, and left quietly.

Over the days, I began to see traits in Isadora that were similar to my mother during my teenage years. When she was annoyed by something, she didn't care about who was near her, she'd just explode without thinking about the damage she could do. A little bit bitter and almost always thinking the whole world was against her.

The times I went downtown with her, we could talk about many things and she told me a lot about her life. She cared for her elderly father alone, two small children, two hostels, and some guesthouses to manage, no recognition from her brother and partner. In addition to depression and a newly healed tumor in her head, which she was afraid it would return at any moment, she complained of headaches

every day and often asked me to massage her neck and forehead. I felt compassion for Isadora, seeing in her the same needs I had already recognized in my mother: attention, affection, and care. Basically, what every human being looks for: love.

51 – WHAT IS OBVIOUS HAS TO BE SAID, MAYBE MORE THAN ONCE

I left my things in the bedroom, put on my bikini and shorts, and ran to the beach restaurant. I was hungry, but I had missed lunch time. As I waited for the margherita pizza on the counter, I noticed a tall, shaved dark-haired boy. Very blue eyes, very large and very black eyelashes and a well trimmed beard. Beside him there was a youthful blonde, smooth-skinned and green-eyed, and another guy, shorter but also very handsome. The one with the shaved head was nice, but I soon looked away.

On WhatsApp there was a message from Luis saying he had a surprise for me:

- I don't like surprises – I said, rolling my eyes.

- It's in my room, you'll have to go there to see it – he said. It seemed like I wasn't talking to the same person and that annoyed me. He didn't seem to understand my language, although it was the same language.

I didn't answer anymore and, still with the taste of basil in my mouth, I went down the wooden deck and lay on a chair facing the sea. A few feet from me, the blue-eyed boy and the green-eyed girl were already lying face down on towels in the sand, their eyes closed and in complete silence.

I looked at my cell phone again and didn't open Luis's last message. He wanted to know where I was, but I felt lazy to reply to him. I knew I still needed to talk about this mess he was making, but right now I wanted some peace.

I put on the headphones and closed my eyes, feeling the sun warm my skin. Even with the music playing, I could still hear the noise of the sea and the laughter of a group of guests talking above on the restaurant deck.

After a few hours concentrated on the gentle blowing wind, I was surprised by a kiss on my belly button. I got up quickly and it was Luis.

- Goddammit, I've got a fright. Don't do that ever again! – I said, annoyed.

- Sorry, I couldn't resist it – He smiled, showing that he couldn't really understand my signals. – The sun will set soon, can I see it with you?

- The beach is public – turning my back, avoiding looking at him from under the sunglasses as I sat on the chair hiding my belly and legs with my sarong.

I wanted to kick him out of there, but I just couldn't. Luís aroused in me a terrible feeling of pity.

I left things as they were, we watched the sunset together and I went back to the room alone to take a shower before dinner. That whole situation was making me exhausted and I wanted more than ever a poisonous drink prepared by Nick, the friendly American bartender who worked at the reception bar at night.

When I arrived at the restaurant for dinner, Luis immediately came toward me and gave me another kiss. It seemed he wanted to show people that he was with me. I didn't like it and walked in Luana's direction quickly, she was watching me standing by the buffet.

I got myself some pesto noodles, grilled chicken breast, and a mixture of broccoli with some other braised vegetables. I sat next to Luana at one of the tables where a group of volunteers chatted happily and Luis, of course, sat next to me. I was so nervous I didn't notice who the other people around were. He kept putting his hand on my leg and my back all the time.

- Stop touching me, Luis, please – I asked, holding his hand tightly and pulling it off my thigh.

- Sorry, I forget you tickle – He replied laughing as I took a deep breath to contain the anger that was beginning to consume me.

When dinner was over, I got up and walked near Luana, who was waiting for the time to pick up the dishes by the serving line.

- Please save me. I don't know what to do with him anymore – I said, holding her hands tightly before Luis arrived, placing his hand on my waist once more.

- Please take your hands off me, Luis – I said as politely as I could without taking my eyes off Luana.

- Sorry, I always forget that you tickle – he spoke with his accent that I once found charming, but now it made me sick.

- I don't tickle – I explained, trying to see in his face if he could understand that I didn't want him close to me.

- Can you leave us alone please? We're talking about something private – I kept turning my eyes away from him.

He walked away still laughing, which pissed me off even more. My gaze on Luana was one of utter despair.

- I'm sorry about that, but I'd like to thank you – Luana held my hands again – Before you arrived, I was the victim.

- How come? Were you with him too? – I asked.

- No, thank God, no. But he pissed me off for a few days. He is really desperate to find a girlfriend since he arrived here three or four days ago. You'll need to be very clear but still he won't understand well. Mainly because you've kissed him before. I can't imagine what

you're going through.

I waited for Luana to finish her work and was relieved to see Luis leaving the restaurant with the rest of the volunteers.

When we arrived at the reception bar, guests and staff were excited for another night of games and drunkenness. Luis, as I expected, ran to me and put his hand around my waist again, lifting his chin all proud.

- Let's go outside, Luis. I wanna talk to you – I said, taking his arms off my body.

- Do you want to go to my room to see the surprise I told you about? – he asked me with a sensual voice.

- We can go to your room, but I don't wanna see any surprises. I want to say something much more serious. – I said it crossing the street toward the lodge in a hurry. I wanted to have a final conversation with him, and I knew I needed more privacy, as it seemed Luis couldn't understand the reality.

When we entered the room, two single mattresses were on the floor forming a double bed and this pissed me off even more.

- This is my surprise. A double bed in a room with a balcony for you – he spread his arms, showing the tidy space.

- Luis, I'm sorry to frustrate your expectations – I said, heading for the balcony that overlooked the other rooms – I want to tell you as clearly as I can that you are getting it all wrong. I said I don't want to be with anyone and I made a mistake kissing you, I hope you will forgive me for that. I'm sorry if you understood I wanted something serious with you. I can't make myself clear, I'm really uncomfortable with your presence.

He tried to hold my hands and looked at me with disbelief. Hoping that at some point I'd say I was joking. And that started to make me even angrier.

- Stop touching me – I raised my voice a little – Listen to everything I have to tell you carefully, please – I pulled away.

- Calm down. You're angry for nothing. Tell me what I've done wrong and I'll fix it – He walked in my direction trying to hold me again, but I pulled away immediately – You don't want me to touch you in public anymore… I won't. Deal!

- Luis, I don't want to be with you anymore. I wanna tell you that in a good way, being polite. I don't wish you anything bad. We're not together, we're not dating. I don't want to kiss you, I don't want you touching me anywhere. I don't even want to be near you. That's what I want you to understand – I poured everything out quickly so he couldn't interrupt me.

- Did Luana say anything bad about me to you? That's it? It must be. She must be jealous – He put his hands on his hips, staring at the

horizon.

- No. Luana didn't tell me anything about you. I want to be alone right now and you're suffocating me. I didn't want to kiss you yesterday, but now it's too late. I can't go back and undo it. So if you understood that this was a sign we'd be together as a couple, I'm here now to say no, it wasn't. I made a mistake, I feel bad about it. But there's nothing between us and I hope you understand and respect that – at that moment my voice was calmer, as if I were explaining to a frustrated teenager that he couldn't go to the weekend party.

- It's because of him, isn't it? – Luís looked at me with anger and irony – I had already realized the way you look at each other.

- Him? Who? – I asked confused.

- The French guy. I've already noticed everything. Do you think I'm stupid? – That accusation made no sense to me. I didn't know any French. I thought he was looking for some tactic to reverse things.

- I don't know who you're talking about. I came here to say that we aren't together and I hope you won't come close to me – I said, walking towards the exit.

- Right. I'm sorry. Are you going back to the bar? – he asked resignedly.

- No. I'll go to my room.

52 – A GREEK DANCE

When I got into Isadora's house that morning, the radio was on and it was playing a very beautiful Greek song. My boss was beaming and humming along with the old stereo.

- Can you dance, Paula? – she asked me from the kitchen while her husband arranged the children for school on the living room couch.

- Greek music? This is the first time I've listened to it – I explained with my accented English.

- Come on, darling. I'll teach you a few steps – She turned up the volume and took off her shoes as she dragged me by the hand to the living room rug.

The children, the boy was six and the girl was five, had fun watching our show, while Solon smiled, looking at the woman who was bubbling with happiness.

- Glad to see you like this, Isadora. This is a great way to start the day, don't you think kids? – I commented. Sofia and Dimitri clapped.

- It's this *malaca*'s – Isadora released me and walked towards her husband, kissing him on the mouth.

Malacca was the only Greek expression I learned in my days in Corfu. The meaning was something like ass or big ass. Asshole, in English translation.

I worked less than 2 hours that morning and Isadora invited me to go downtown with her by car. She had some things to work out and wanted company.

- Luis is a good guy and he seems to like you – she told me, balancing her brown acrylic glasses at the tip of her nose and lifting her head to look at the road through the lens.

- I believe he is, but he got confused. We're not together.

- But I saw you kissing at the bar. Yesterday he was working very happy, but today I noticed that he was very quiet. – She continued without looking away from the road.

- Yes. That kiss was a mistake. He insisted a lot, I drank a few more beers… – I tried to justify what was unjustifiable, and gave up. – I didn't want to have kissed him and I still blame myself for that – I said, looking out the car window and watching the piles of garbage accumulated on the side of the road.

- Don't worry. He'll forget that soon. You must forget it too – Isadora comforted me.

53 – CHANGE IS THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

The days went slowly and hot on this unknown island of Greece. I, at least, had never heard of Corfu. The beach near the hostel was bathed by the indescribable blue of the Mediterranean Sea and it had many rounded stones scattered across the coarse sand.

I had to be direct with Isadora to have my work schedule respected. In the early days, I was working 7 to 8 hours a day, when the contract on the work exchange website said 5 hours a day.

- Will you still need me today, Isadora? – I asked as soon as the clock struck one o'clock on my fourth day. I arrived at 8 am punctually, and was I missing the employees' lunch break every day.

- Why? Do you have anything urgent to sort out? – Isadora asked curiously.

- No. But my 5 hours of work are complete for today and I'd like to enjoy the beach – I said calmly as she had a facial expression I couldn't read.

- You can go. I'll text you if I need anything later – she said a little annoyed. I could tell she understood my message.

After having some white rice with sautéed vegetables and pot roast for lunch, I spent all afternoon at the beach alone. I began to remember everything I had experienced in those eight months since the divorce. It was more than I had lived in my 36 years of life. How things have changed? How many times have things changed since the biggest change of all?

Lulu Santos'[16] song came to my mind as a message from my memory.

> Nada do que foi será
> De novo do jeito que já foi um dia
> Tudo passa
> Tudo sempre passará.
> A vida vem em ondas como o mar
> Num indo e vindo infinito
> Tudo o que se vê não é
> Igual ao que a gente viu há um segundo
> Tudo muda o tempo todo no mundo
> Não adianta fingir
> Nem mentir
> Pra si mesmo agora
> Há tanta vida lá fora

E aqui dentro sempre
Como uma onda no mar.[17]

I cried copiously looking at the waves dying in the sand. Each one in a different way. I was so thorough that I began to become aware of the reality around me.

“It is impossible to have one wave like another. Not even the days are alike. In a few seconds the clouds move and the sky has already changed. The water that has just come has taken thousands of grains of sand and not even the beach is the same. Never. Everything, absolutely everything, is changing all the time. Every thousandth of a second things are changing and nothing is ever the same again. Change is the nature of the universe.”

After writing this down in my reflective journal, I wondered why humans are so resistant to change if our body itself is constantly changing? We’re made of the same changing matter as the rest of the world. I was sure that living this unpredictable trip was meant to teach me once and for all that nothing was permanent. But it still took me a long time to accept this lesson.

54 – THE FRENCH GUY

In my short blue flowery dress, I came back from another sunset by the beach. As I was waking up earlier to have a shower and breakfast before work, I changed my meditation routine to late afternoon and I was given the most beautiful sunsets of the entire trip as gifts every day.

I described those moments with inexplicable emotion in my gratitude journal, which I always wrote after meditating.

Luis hadn't given up on me yet and I was very angry with him. Even so, I wondered what that situation wanted to show me daily. What he had that made me so disgusted. But the things he did are matters for another time.

That late afternoon, I met the blue-eyed guy with black eyelashes whose name I didn't know yet, playing basketball alone on the court near the pool. The whole area was completely abandoned, as it was low season and the beach restaurant had been closed that morning. None of the private rooms around the pool were occupied, and the entire seaside complex was quiet, like a cemetery. Only the laundry was open in the morning.

As I approached the court, trying to disguise the euphoria that engulfed me, I noticed a smirk on his face.

- Hello – he said, looking at me with a strange mixture of shyness and boldness.

- Hi! – I answered smiling and, I admit, nicer than usual.

- How are you doing? – He asked as he tossed the ball from one hand to the other, watching me walk.

- Good, what about you? – I said, without stopping walking and not looking back.

- I'm good too.

The same night I made things clear to Luis, I told Luana about the jealous question he had made about a French guy that I didn't even know who he was. She then pointed at the boy, exactly him.

- They are both handsome, but I'm impressed by the shorter one – she warned.

- Really? Is that him? It was the only guy I found interesting here. But I think he's with his girlfriend. Do I look at him so much that Luis and other people notice? – I asked.

- I'm not sure if the blonde is his girlfriend. But Luis's question may be insecurity. The three of them work together, and not even men can deny the two French guys are very handsome – she deduced.

From that day on, Luana and I had fun whenever the French guys arrived in the same place we were.

- *Oi lindos, tudo bem? /* Hi handsome, everything all right? – we'd say in Portuguese, but in a serious conversation tone.

The Argentinian blonde was a guest and left in a few days while the French guys kept working at the hostel. Their relationship was really strange. They were always together, but they didn't touch, didn't kiss, didn't even hold hands. But I never dared to ask anything about them.

55 – MORE THAN A THORN IN THE SIDE

The Argentinian had already left, and the French were alone at a table near the huge window at dinner time.

- Let's sit with them.

It was common for volunteers to always sit at the same tables and with the same people. Luana and I always sat together, but we were always changing tables and companies. So it would not be strange to occupy the empty seats at the table with the handsome boys.

- Can we sit with you? – I asked with the tray in my hands, staring into his beautiful blue eyes.

- Of course. – He shook his head with a smile.

- My name is Paula and this is Luana. We're from Brazil. – I said as I pulled the chair.

- France. – He pointed to his friend and to himself. "I'm Laurent." "Lorran," he continued to put his hand on his chest with that "r" pulled from the roof of his mouth.

- Jean – "Jan" replied the friend, smiling at Luana.

We didn't have much time to talk in peace. Luis soon arrived, served his plate and sat at the same table, right in front of me. Talking to the boys with forced excitement and intimacy, he made jokes. My face changed dramatically.

- Paula, we're going to the village for a few drinks after dinner. Do you wanna go? – Luis asked me with a begging face. Luana had already commented about the night of drinks in one of the bars of the charming little village that was just down the street from our hostel and I had said that if Luis was going then I wouldn't go.

- No thanks. – I said without looking at him.

- Come on. Why not? – he insisted.

- Luis, don't invite me to do anything, please. I'll always say no to you, – I said in a low, aggressive tone, this time looking straight into his eyes.

The table was in awkward silence. We were speaking Portuguese, but from the way I spoke, I believe that even the French guys understood that I was blowing him off.

At the end of dinner, Luis got up and said he would go to his room to get his wallet. When he left us four at the table, I felt more relaxed.

- Are you going to the bar, Paula? – Laurent asked.

- I would like to, but Luis annoys me a lot. – I said with sadness.

- I know. But don't mind him. Let's go! – He could ask me

anything by flashing his long black lashes over those blue eyes. I would say yes without thinking.

As we were walking down the street, Luís ran to reach us.

- Wait for me, you sons of bitches! – He shouted in his Portuguese accent. – Did you change your mind, Paula? What happened? – He asked, his voice lower, but still in English, when he reached my side.

- Laurent invited me.

- And why did you accept his invitation and not mine?

- Because I want to go to the bar with him, not with you. – I just wanted Luís to stop forcing me to be so aggressive. I didn't know how to talk to him anymore.

The most embarrassing thing is that, as he asked the question in English, I also answered in English. So everyone understood our conversation and we had another moment of awkward silence.

* * *

Luana and Jean were sitting next to me, but they seemed to be in a lovely private world. They talked so closely that it was impossible to understand what they said. On the bench across the coffee table, Louis was sitting at one end and Laurent at the other, both facing me. I wasn't worried at all about hiding my interest in Laurent from Luis. The night before, I had already let go of any consideration and compassion towards the Portuguese.

As the radio played lively pop music, accompanied by music videos on the TV sets, colorful lights illuminated the bar's empty tables. Beside us, the hostel's stray-dog mascot Bob watched the drunken dance of a couple sitting at the counter talking to the waiters.

Luis looked at me with a mixture of indignation and despair and tried to convince Luana or me to dance with him, but neither of us was interested. Laurent just laughed and looked at me with some complicity, as if silently agreeing that Lois was getting in the way of our plans.

After two drinks, we decided to go back to the hostel bar, where we could drink for a lot less.

Everywhere was completely empty, including the pink bar in our hostel. So we grabbed a few cans of beer from the fridge and went to a seafront balcony where we chatted. By then Luana and Jean had kissed. Laurent sat in the chair right next to me, letting his arm purposefully touch mine. I didn't back down and Luis noticed.

- Why him, Paula? – Luis asked in Portuguese, staring at me as if to hide from Laurent the subject of our conversation.

- Please, Luis, don't start. – I said, looking for some horizon in the

darkness before the porch.

- Why is he better than me? I wanna know. – he continued with a nervous mockery, without changing his tone of voice.

- Luis, I don't want to talk to you anymore. I have politely explained it to you, and I've been rude too. You just don't accept that I want nothing to do with you. I do not owe you any explanation. Please, you're just making things worse. – I pleaded.

- But I want to know why you favored him." – Luis insisted.

- Enough! Enough! – I was already mad.

Luana could understand the whole conversation but she remained silent next to Jean. But Laurent threatened to get up.

- Okay, guys. Things are getting tense here and I don't want to get involved. – he spoke in English with his French accent.

- No, Laurent, please stay. Luis is insisting on a subject that is already closed, but I'm sure he will stop now, right? – I turned my face to Luis, who had a nervous smile on his face.

We tried to stay there for a few more minutes, but Luis was really annoying, so I gave up waiting for him to leave us alone and went to my room. That night I cursed the exact minute I gave in to the pressure and let Luis kiss me. Just remembering that moment made my stomach turn.

56 – TWENTY ONE UNBEARABLE CENTIMETERS

One night after I had politely clarified things with Luís, I was sitting with Luana at one of the bar tables, talking trivia with other volunteers, when he came to my side and discreetly showed me some notes on his cell phone.

From that moment on, I abandoned any attempt at being friendly or even respectful towards Luis. The text on the device read “21 cm.”

- This is my size, just so you know. – He said quietly, trying to make the screen visible only to me.

- What? – I asked in astonishment. – I didn’t ask you anything, and I’m not interested in your size, you idiot.

- I already know you’ve been talking about me. – He turned off the display and walked away.

I was so disgusted that I rolled my eyes and turned the glass of *Tequila Sunrise* at the same time.

- You surely have a mental problem. – I raised my voice as he crossed the bar.

That same night Luis came and apologized to me for the inconvenience. Although I already knew that he had fantasized about the madness that I said something about his physique.

- Some people have told me that you’ve been saying that I have a small dick. – he justified.

- Stop fantasizing, Luis. No one told you anything. I didn’t see your dick, I didn’t touch your dick, I didn’t even come close to wanting to do anything with your dick. We both know that you’re lying. Please don’t speak to me anymore.

I had a few more drinks that night, and as I was on my way to my room, having wished a good night to those who stayed at the bar, Luis followed me and tried to steal a kiss from me on the stairs leading to the barracks.

I was so angry that I cursed him, demanding that he kept his distance from me. I didn’t realize it, but that behavior had already crossed the line and I should have complained of harassment with Isadora.

57 – SUNSET IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The beach was completely empty that afternoon. With the waterfront bar closed, not even the few guests were willing to take the 122 steps and 300-meter walk to the sand. I particularly liked that emptiness very much. Most of the time, it was me, the sea, the sun, and Bob the stray-dog.

The meditation that afternoon was intense. I had just said goodbye to Luana and was a bit melancholic. Also, before closing my eyes, I decided to try to understand what Luis's defiant presence on my trip might be trying to teach me. Everyone says that when something in the other person bothers us a lot, it is because it reflects something within ourselves.

I refused to accept that I could have something like that desperate need, lack of self-esteem, and over-inflated ego. But I already knew that I couldn't consider myself superior to him either. Then, before meditation, I took a deep breath and wrote in my reflective journal: "What can I learn from Luis?"

My reflective journal was born the week after my divorce when I was still in Curitiba and had no plans to go to Bahia. What kept me somewhat balanced at that time was meditating and writing my feelings in a notebook to rationalize what I was really feeling. It was such a violent emotional turmoil I believed I could go mad at any moment. Turning my feelings and emotions into words helped me maintain my sanity.

Living with Luis bothered me very much, and regretting kissing him made me so angry that I simply wanted to erase it from my mind. As a result, I had not even mentioned his name in my reflective journal, let alone the gratitude journal. But everything we deny grows. So I decided to stop resisting and try to understand why I had attracted such a difficult situation to my life.

I synchronized the rhythm of my breathing with the sound of the waves and watched my thoughts dance inside my head. A cool, almost cold breeze blew, but I just noticed the air swaying the loose strands of my hair and gently touching the skin of my arms and legs. The sun was starting to set, but it was still warm with some intensity on my face, my lap, and my thighs crossed over the beach towel spread in the thick sand. At the nape of my neck, I noticed a trickle of seawater running from my wet hair. The icy, steady trickle made me shiver, but I resisted the urge to contain it.

When I opened my eyes, the sky was already colored by vibrant orange and an extract of clouds on the horizon mixed shades of blue and lilac. The sun was a small yellow fireball about to touch the line

that separates the sky from the ocean. Tears welled up without warning and I just let them run free down my cheeks until they were in my lap.

I just wanted to say thanks. Thanks for all the changes that led me to that sunset on the Mediterranean Sea. Thank Felipe for being firm in my suffering and insisting on the divorce. Thanks because it all happened after I had already signed the termination of my contract on TV, otherwise I would not have had the courage to go on such a trip. I felt genuine gratitude because that deep rejection pushed me into much more beautiful and transformative things.

At that very moment, when I rationalized that it was the desire not to feel rejected anymore that led me to struggle to be happier. I finally understood another behavior of mine that originated in the emotional wound of rejection. In the first few seconds, I couldn't turn it into an organized thought, but it was as if a flash exploded in my mind and I could only cry even more.

After having that unreasonable discovery, I started writing and I was able to make sense of all that emotion. Rejection was so painful to me that I couldn't stand even seeing other people feeling rejected. Being rejected was as difficult as rejecting someone and so I was unable to hold onto it, especially to men. "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." And to obey the saying, I did not kill, I did not steal, nor did I reject.

I might even refuse a flirt at first, but if there was insistence, emotional distress, psychological blackmail, I would give in. And at that moment, several memories of my adolescence and youth sprang into my memory. All the boys I dated against my will simply because I couldn't say no. One of them, I dated for three months, and even forced myself to have sex with him, just because he insisted so much and he said he loved me and I couldn't fight my own will.

Other guys that even caused me revulsion. All faces came to my mind as I stared at the words I had just written and could only cry.

Finally, Felipe seemed to be sitting in front of me. At that time, I was crying so heavily that I looked around to make sure I was really alone on the beach.

How painful it was to admit that the beginning of my marriage was not the fairy tale I made people believe. Along with the aching cry came remorse and shame. The last time I cried so loud was on the bar steps of our house when Felipe cried with me.

It took me a while to give in to Felipe's flirtation when we met. We always met at the same parties and bars and he tried to get close to me. One day, I decided to give in and ended up prolonging that casual relationship with him because my ex-boyfriend, who I was still in love with, treated me like rubbish and, with Felipe, I had the

comfort and attention that I was looking for. When I realized, Felipe was in love, making plans for me to move with him and even buying our engagement rings. Afraid of losing the affection and attention he gave me, I let things get out of my control and, sorry to hurt Felipe, I moved to the other side of Brazil without being sure what my heart truly wanted.

It was much easier to say that I was completely in love and that our story had been truly passionate. While it all hurts so much, I was also relieved to realize that this was all I could do at 22.

As I organized the thoughts within myself, with my notes in the reflective journal, my inner voice asked me to forgive myself for all the times I forced myself against my will and that finally revealed what Luis came to teach me.

- It had to be very uncomfortable to make you look at it for real. If it was someone who just gave up easily, you would run away from guilt, keep that discomfort once again under the rug and keep making the same mistakes.

By then the sky was already covered with a bluish-pink veil and the wind had dried my tears. I took the last breath of relief and gratitude and left tons of guilt behind on the beach.

58 – THE MOST EXPECTED KISS

Before going to my room, I passed the little grocery store in the village and bought a new hair cream. It had been a while since I had taken care of myself. I didn't feel ugly, but my hair was really dry.

Before the trip, which feels like another life, I would do my nails and wash my hair in the salon every week. I would dye my hair every three months and have it hydrated once a month. I also routinely had sections of laser hair removal and eyebrow design. When I packed my backpack for Canada, I hesitated to leave the hair dryer behind. Would I survive without drying my bangs?

It was unbelievable to recognize myself in that person who didn't have her nails polished with sun-stained skin. I was still vain, but now I shaved with a razor and had learned to like my natural hair. The blemishes on my face, which got much worse after the hormone treatment to get pregnant, bothered me a little, so I couldn't put the 100% makeup aside. Still, I was glad to stop feeling hostage to those weekly hours I spent in the beauty salon.

That night, though, after crying so hard on the beach, I wanted to enjoy the fact that my Ukrainian roommate had left and use our tiny pink bathroom as my private spa.

In addition to the hair cream, I also bought a body moisturizer and deodorant, since mine was at the end.

I turned on a lively playlist and, with the bathroom door open, to let the music in, I bathed as a princess. I shaved my legs and armpits while a plastic bag enhanced the moisture in my hair, and I used the lace of one of my panties to exfoliate my face skin with the shampoo foam.

I put on a generous amount of moisturizer on my wet body and ended up drying myself naturally as I danced at Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You," completely naked.

My healing on the beach made me so light that I seemed to be walking on clouds. Along with the weight the tears took away, the makeshift spa with in-room music helped lift my self-esteem and energy. I put on some natural makeup, marking my eyes with brown eyeshadow, an extra layer of mascara and arrived for dinner with my hair still wet.

Jean and I looked at each other with an almost intimate mutual understanding of what it meant to miss Luana.

At the airport, before boarding for Croatia, she sent me a message telling me that she woke up to a delightful "bonjour." That afternoon, before going to the beach, I ran to the bus stop to say goodbye to my friend and Brazilian confidant. I met Jean with her and also saw when

the Australian who worked at the bar arrived by tricycle to say goodbye too.

She and the Australian had a night together before Jean, but the situation was confused between them and Luana ended up being enchanted by the Frenchman's artistic way. I can't blame her. If he was a few inches taller, I would have surrendered too.

- It seems that Brazilians are very disputed here in Greece – she had fun in the message she sent me on her cell phone.

That night the corner table near the bulky beige curtains became my usual table.

- Now you'll have to adopt me." – I said making a sad face, as I pulled the chair next to Laurent. – Or I'll have to sit with Luis – I continued to place both hands on my chest in supplication.

- All right. We are not that bad. You're welcome." – Jean said dismissively.

Luis soon joined us, but strangely seemed more distracted. Some volunteers and guests had left that very afternoon, and a new wave of strangers arrived. It was a smaller group, which made the hostel bar even more empty. However, Luis seemed quite interested in the girls who were starting to fit in. There were at least four girls of different nationalities. All of them were wearing the guest bracelets.

I couldn't help thinking that the universe had conspired in my favor after the release of all that stagnant energy during my meditation on the beach. It was hard to believe that this was just a coincidence.

After dinner, Jean, Laurent, and I went to the games room, where an Australian and an American shared one of the pool tables. The French occupied the other table while I sat next to watch the game. Although I'm feeling great, Luana's departure left a certain melancholy in everyone.

The Australian finished his pool game and there were only the three of us in the games room. Aware that he was the third wheel, Jean finished his cigarette and went to his room early, leaving Laurent and I sitting on the stairs.

The temperature had dropped a little that night, and I was surprised that Luis made no near-ghostly appearance around me. I considered suggesting one last beer at the reception bar, but the fear of losing that moment of peace spoke louder. I confess I came to think that hellish Portuguese would never leave us alone, but that moment was finally here and none of us knew what to do.

Even so, that discomfort was delightful. We both tried to disguise our shy grins and measure our words. We both knew our first kiss was closer than ever. We knew it would be that night, we just didn't know how to let it happen. Who would take the first step? What to do? Say

something or just kiss?

Looking to buy time, we talked about my friendship with Luana and how we became close despite the difference of almost 13 years. It was very clear that we were going around the bush so I decided to take a stand and somehow give him an ultimatum.

- Time to go to bed. – I got up, unable to hide my anxiety.

We walked together to the hall that led to my room and stopped facing each other. My heart was still racing, but this time it was different. I couldn't mask the smile on my face. And neither could Laurent.

- So… – He raised those innocent, charming blue eyes as he took my hand.

- So… – I answered awkwardly, looking back at him; I then looked down and saw our fingers intertwining. I also watch as he took a step closer toward me before I felt the other hand touching my neck and lifting my face gently.

We looked at each other anxiously, almost euphorically but at the same time relieved. Finally, our long-awaited kiss would happen and it was as if he wanted to freeze that moment too. The moment between the certainty of what would come and the end of our wait.

I closed my eyes and opened my lips as he sighed before touching my mouth for the first time.

"So is this the French kiss I wanted so badly?" I asked as I felt the care with which he pressed his body against mine. I ran my hands down the nape of his neck and held his face to feel his breath blow my nose. I wanted him to be sure that I had longed for that moment. I wanted to feel if he had wanted that too.

- Finally – I said with my eyes still closed.

- Finally – he agreed smiling.

- See you tomorrow – I said before kissing him again, slowly.

- Sure. Maybe you'll invite me to your room? – He smiled mischievously.

59 – INTENSIVE AND KIND AS I'VE NEVER SEEN

We walked down the street of the hostel hand in hand and headed to one of the typical bars. Luis, Jean, Laurent, and I were practically an inseparable quartet. No one insisted on Luis's presence, but we were the only group that put up with him. Over time, I think I got used to his way.

Laurent was 10 years younger than me, and that was no problem for us. He said he didn't care, but I confess I had a somewhat more critical judgment. I always wonder what people would think of a 37-year-old woman venturing into the backpacking world and dating much younger boys. "Being happy," I answered myself to quiet my ego.

- Age is just a number, Paula. Besides, you don't look over 30 – he told me the only time we talked about it.

That night, while the four of us were playing pool, Laurent and I exchanged glances and kisses, while being observed by Luis. The bar was empty as usual and the colored lights made a disproportionate movement to the excitement of the people at the tables.

After following the clash of the billiard balls on the table, Laurent ignored the result of his own movement and walked towards me with the same sweet look as always, surrounded by that long black eyelashes bush.

- You're too beautiful, girl – he sang along with the song before giving me a kiss on the forehead.

I realized once again that Luis was watching, but I couldn't help but enjoy those moments. There were a few days left before I left, and since I couldn't stretch the hours with Laurent, I made the most of them by giving and receiving as much affection as possible. Staying around us and witnessing that was Luis's choice.

Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for us, it was like that all the time and anywhere. At the hostel, at dinner, on the balcony amid all volunteers and guests, or between four walls. Our hands were always on each other's bodies. Laurent never sat next to me without putting his arm around my shoulders or sliding his fingers over my hands and thighs. I felt all that affection and reciprocated.

We loved each other every day before sleeping and when we woke up, he would always caress my back and stare into my eyes for long, lovely minutes.

- Stop looking at me like that – I asked in vain.

Sometimes he would wake me at dawn and not even tiredness

would keep him from caressing my hair until I fell asleep again, after we woke up the next-door rooms with the noise of our annoying spring mattress.

I never dared to do so, but I wanted to ask what kind of relationship he had with the beautiful Argentina who was always with him in the early days. I never even saw them holding hands, but with me, he was so generous in showing affection.

I avoided thinking about leaving. Jean and him, companions on various trips, would return to France the day after my departure, and they didn't talk about it either. I knew I would miss all that, but fate was fixed. My ticket to Istanbul had already been purchased as well as the ticket from Turkey to Thailand.

Two nights before our goodbye, I was leaning on the large front porch talking to my sister via text message when Laurent surprised me. He came quietly, hugged me tightly by my back, wrapped one arm over my shoulders, and whispered in my ear before kissing my head:

- I'm gonna miss you so much.

At that moment, the pain of another separation crushed my chest and I wanted to cry, but I closed my eyes focusing on the joy of feeling the warmth of his body. I gripped his arms even tighter and, barely breathing in my lungs, just muttered:

- Me too.

60 – A LEAP OF FAITH

The sun was burning bright, but the Mediterranean wind soothed the heat of that morning. We had been rowing for a few minutes, but I, mesmerized by the clear blue of the sea, cannot say how long it took to reach the small cove where our tour made the first stop.

As I lost myself looking at the submerged rocks many meters below our boat. I heard Luis telling his boring jokes with his annoying accent. In front of me, Laurent paddled and I tried to keep up with the rhythm of his arms.

As we tied the yellow plastic kayaks to a rock, Fred, the guide, warned that this was the stop for jumping and pointed to the top of a rock.

- It's eight meters tall and I challenge you to jump naked – he had fun while everyone laughed.

I felt my stomach turn as I looked at the top. I immediately said that I would not jump, but I followed the group and started climbing the rock.

I wanted to see if the cliff was less scary from above, but the easiest wall to climb was full of sharp cracks that hurt my feet badly. It was difficult to find a place of support without having the sensation of something piercing your skin.

- If you don't want to jump, you should know that you can't go down the same path. Whoever climbs higher will have to continue until we reach the top and the only way down is by jumping – Fred commented when we were about two meters high.

I can't say what kept me going. I knew I would have no choice when I reached the top, but I kept climbing.

As we reached the top, everyone approached the edge carefully to be aware of the height. My heart was pounding because of the struggle and the anxiety and I felt a kind of shivering in my stomach. Meditation made me so attentive to my body that I could feel the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins until my fingertips burned as I looked down.

For a few seconds I regretted climbing, but then I began to encourage myself. There was no other way out than by jumping. I wanted to tell that story one day and say that I jumped with the group. It wouldn't be the same if I took the tour and didn't live the most challenging experience of all.

Fred made no recommendation for the jump. He simply stopped in front of the group, took off his shorts and jumped naked before everyone, with his legs spread. You could hear the cries of those watching from below.

Then Laurent, Luis, and third person jumped. Me and Jean looked at each other and he asked if I wanted to go ahead.

- You can jump, I'll go later – I said, watching him walk away to gain momentum. However, I was invaded by a huge wave of courage and knew I had to jump right away.

- Wait! I'll go! I shouted very loudly and threw myself off the rock without thinking. As I fell, I felt my legs and arms swing and beat the force of the wind. I didn't think it would be best to jump with my body straight. I just abandoned myself in the air and waited for the dive. When I finally found the water, it was a tremendous shock. I fell on a sitting position and the impact of my butt against the surface made the sound of a slap. As I sank, I felt my thighs burn with pain and started swimming for the surface. I don't know what took longer, the time of the fall or the way back into the water to breathe.

As I submerged, I heard incredulous shouts.

- Fuck, she fucked herself.

- It must have hurt like hell.

- No doggy style tonight, Laurent! – Someone teased.

I just smiled and swam to try to get out of the water. My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel the water vibrate near my chest. Laurent looked at me with concern and came swimming to meet me.

- Are you all alright? Hold here – he took my left hand and placed it over his right shoulder – I'll help you out.

I can't explain what this care has done inside me. I wanted to cry. It was as if he could feel my embarrassment at jumping so clumsily. And while everyone laughed at me, he gave me affection.

- Does it hurt? – Laurent asked me as I pulled myself to the rock where the kayaks were.

- Yes. It's burning. But I'm fine – I said as I wiped my face. – Was it very ridiculous? – I asked seeking some comfort.

- It was just a little funny. – He smiled. – But I'm glad you're fine. The way you fell you could have hurt itself.

- I'm glad I jumped. I'm a little embarrassed, but I've gotten over a lot of fear and I'm proud of myself – I explained with the best English I could find amid the adrenaline rush.

- You're right. Now turn that ass over here and let me see – he said, leading my arm – Fuck! It's very red – he laughed.

- I think I'm going to sleep on my stomach for a few days – I concluded.

The group made jokes about the jump and my red thighs for the rest of the day. I had no choice but to joke and laugh at myself.

Before returning from the tour, we stopped at another mountain in the middle of the sea for lunch. Fred brought everyone sandwiches and we climbed several steps until we found a small green-walled

church high up. There were some tables under the trees, some benches, and a swing hanging between the logs.

The view of the sea was breathtaking, and as we ate bread stuffed with cheese, ham, and cucumber, Fred suggested a game for the group.

Each should say their name, where they were from, the nationality of the person they had last slept with, the last time they had sex, and the nationality of the person they would have sex next. Except that his Australian accent was so difficult, I got some things wrong even when I asked him to explain it again.

- To recap, name, your flag, last shag, last shag flag, and next shag flag.

By Laurent and Jean's answer, I would probably know that I got it wrong, but by the order, I answered before them.

- Paula, Brazil, this morning, France and Turkey.

- Laurent, France, this morning, Brazil and… Sweden – Laurent replied confusing me.

Later, when we were alone, I asked.

- Why is your next flag Sweden? I thought you were going back to France.

- You were supposed to say the next flag you want to fuck – he clarified.

- Son of a bitch, are you telling me that you're gonna fuck a Swedish woman on my face? – I asked smiling.

- Well, you had just said you were gonna fuck a Turk – he defended.

- I said that because I got the game wrong. If I had got it right, I'd say my next flag would be France tonight, – I said mischievously, kissing his neck.

- That's what I expected, but I didn't know you got it wrong – he said, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing me.

I could not be happier. I could sleep and wake up looking into the blue eyes of that little Frenchman, 10 years younger than me, for the rest of my days.

61 – THE LAST NIGHT

After shower and dinner, Laurent and I sat at the reception bar counter in a completely parallel universe. We stared at each other deeply as our hands caressed each other's hair, legs, arms, and fingers. There were a million things I'd like to say to him, but my English level wouldn't allow it and I just let my body speak. He had the same communication difficulties as me, so I tried to listen to his body.

- You two are breaking my heart. – Nick the bartender told us, serving two turquoise cocktails. – Free drinks for you to toast the last night together.

We thanked him and continued our glance exchange. I was so connected to him that I didn't realize that beside me began a heated argument between Louis and their work coordinator. Laurent nodded for me to pay attention to the conversation.

- Let's get this sorted out like men! – Louis shouted.

- Get out of here, you piece of shit. Don't you realize that nobody wants you around? Paula is happy with your friend. Accept that you are a loser and go to sleep – The Albanian fired.

At that moment, Nick looked at me with an astonished expression. As if to say how unnecessary it was to put me in the middle of their discussion.

- Shut up. Fuck Paula and Laurent, I don't care about them. You don't know anything – Luis snapped, moving away from the counter as Laurent tried to lead me to the porch.

- Get outta here, Luis, before I break your teeth, – the boss shouted, pointing to the door.

- I'm going because I don't want to hit a drunk like you – Luis finished, heading for the exit.

Like Laurent, I had no idea how that fight began. Laurent just told me that the work coordinator had been annoyed by Luis for several days.

- Also, Isadora gave Jean and me a break today, but Luis should have gone to work but missed it to do the kayaking tour. That means the supervisor worked alone, which must have pissed him off even more – he explained to me.

We set that inconvenience aside and sat on the straw couch against the wall. The same couch I let Luis kiss me on my first night at the bar.

- So, we'll say goodbye tomorrow and you still haven't told me what drove you on this trip around the world – Laurent questioned me.

- It's not a very happy story. Are you sure you wanna hear it? – I

asked as I crossed my legs over his thighs.

- If it will make you sad, then no – he said gently.

So I started telling everything in a whole new way.

62 – THE END AND THE START OF EVERYTHING

We had just arrived at the clinic. We were taking a few days of vacation in Rio to visit my father-in-law, who was almost 81 years old. The change was set. In 10 days we would be leaving on an adventure to Belém do Pará and Felipe was very excited about the trip in the new car.

I had just talked to my doctor over the phone. The transvaginal ultrasound I performed that morning said I had 14 eggs ready to be fertilized.

- A great chance of twin pregnancy – Dr. Francisco celebrated – Take the hormone I prescribed you tonight and have sex for the next three days – he said before hanging up the phone.

It was hot in Rio and we decided to go to the pharmacy to buy the hormone later. Lying on the couch in the Santa Tereza mansion, and while we waited for Felipe's aunt to prepare lunch, we were talking about how strange it was to know that I would probably get pregnant in the next few days.

I went into the kitchen for a soda, and on my return, I heard Felipe muttering on the phone. That was very strange since he never spoke quietly. Even when his phone rang on Sunday mornings, with me sleeping beside him, Felipe spoke loudly.

When I stopped in front of the door, he quickly hung up and stared at me.

- Who was it? – I asked.

- No one – he looked back at his cell phone making sure the phone was off – Someone called the wrong number.

I handed him the soda can and sat at the coffee table right in front of him.

- We both know that you're lying. I have all the time in the world to wait for the truth.

I spent days blaming myself for insisting. I remade that scene in my mind a thousand different ways. I was angry that Felipe answered the phone during our vacation. I was angry even more when he told me the truth, even in the face of my obstinacy.

I felt the ground disappear. I no longer had a home, a job, a husband, or a baby. I was completely lost and realized that after almost 15 years of marriage, I knew absolutely nothing about who I was or what I would like to do after all that.

- I'm so sorry you went through this – Laurent said, holding my hand.

- You know – I sighed deeply – I've been very sorry before, but today I don't regret it anymore. If it hadn't been so painful, if it hadn't happened that way, I wouldn't have traveled. I wouldn't be here in Greece and I wouldn't have met you. If I could, I'd send flowers from Greece to thank Felipe.

63 – THERE IS ONLY A GOODBY WHERE THERE WAS A HELLO

The alarm went off at 6 AM, but I had been awake for a long time, feeling Laurent's warm, deep breath blowing at the back of my neck. His sleeping hand on my hip felt like a chain, binding me to bed forever. I wish I didn't have to leave. I wish this time would never come. I felt an urge to cry but held back the tears.

The day was beginning to brighten and light our bed through the slits of the Venetian window. When I threatened to get up, he pulled me around the waist, hugging me with his warm body.

- Please don't – he murmured, kissing my back.

- I know. Leaving you here should be a crime and I should be arrested for it. – I turned my body, kissing his mouth with intensity.

We said nothing more. We made love for the last time and I dressed with his scent still on my skin. I had no more time to shower. Isadora would be so kind to drive me to the airport and said that we would have to leave by 6.30 so that I had time to check in calmly.

I brushed my teeth in a hurry and we smoked one last cigarette together in front of the room. I believed it would be better to leave first. I thought that seeing him leave before I did would arise my feelings and remind me of when I saw Felipe leaving Curitiba, and I didn't want to feel abandoned again, even if that wasn't the reality between Laurent and me.

- Have a nice trip. Let's try to see each other again – he said, before our last kiss.

Already at the airport, as I walked down the airstrip toward the airplane ladder, I finally felt all the tears I had held back those last days in Corfu flood my eyes.

Hiding in the window of the aircraft with a smile on my face, I just let the tears fall. And there were many tears. Just before the security briefing began, a large black-eyed flight attendant handed me a tissue and just smiled. I returned the smile in gratitude and turned my eyes to the sun rising outside. I felt an immense appreciation, but an even greater longing. How it is possible to feel both joy and sadness?

64 – THE NO TEST

I had been in Istanbul for almost 4 hours, lost in public transport and trying to communicate in vain with the Turkish people. Everyone I stopped to ask for information told me they spoke English, but I didn't understand a word they said.

I spent 50 Liras idly on the subway card because I couldn't understand the machine and there were no officers to help me. The mobile app gave me a route, but when I started comparing stations, the path was completely different. I changed trains three times and caught the wrong bus that left me on a deserted street where I couldn't even find a café to connect to the internet.

I gave up on public transportation and got into the first taxi I found. It was a long time before we reached my hostel's address, and only the next day I discovered that I was tricked into the old scam already known in Brazil: going round and round with unwary tourists to make money on the meter.

A lively group drank wine and smoked hookahs at the only busy table in the bar. I missed the reception entrance and ended up in the middle of the celebration. I accepted the invitation for a beer but told them I would first leave my things in the dorm.

The room was clean and comfortable. Four black plywood bunk beds, modern and spacious. There were lockers with keys on the side of the beds and in the en-suite. I was the only girl, but the beds had curtains so I wasn't worried.

After leaving the backpacks, I returned to the bar. Two Brazilian women were at the table and told me more about the city. Vivian and Milena were childhood friends. Milena lived in Turkey with her husband and Vivian was enjoying her work break in Brazil for a visit.

In addition to my new Brazilian friends, a nasty Frenchman, two Turks who worked at the hostel, and a German completed the table. There was no one else in the bar and it was a very fun night with wines, beers, hookahs, dances, and laughter.

Vivian was saying goodbye to Osman, with whom she had a brief romance. Milena would return to her city the next day and I was looking for a job that would guarantee at least free accommodation. Osman was the right guy for that, but our conversation only happened the next day.

I had applied three times for a volunteer receptionist job at the same hostel, but as the management did not respond to my requests, I booked one night as a guest and hoped to talk personally about the work.

The next afternoon, Osman arrived early to talk to me. Tall,

brown hair, green eyes, and a well-designed mouth. He was wearing jeans, nice shoes, and a brown leather jacket he always had on. He wasn't ugly, but the way he looked at me bothered me. Also, when we talked more closely I could feel an onion breath that was wrapping my stomach.

- Paula, we do the pub crawl every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. You will earn 5 euros for each person you bring on the tour – he explained, staring at me. – Today we have a large group and you can come with us to see how it works. Tomorrow I can put you in the volunteer house," he concluded.

The work was very simple. The night began with a drink at the hostel bar, another drink on the bus that took us to the Asian side of the city and three drinks at different nightclubs, all of them free for participants. I just needed to make sure the customers were interacting and make sure everyone got their free drinks. I also had to give away flower strips or make psychedelic neon paintings.

The night went very well, but Osman wanted to be with me. What a situation, having to say no to my "boss." In the third nightclub, after distributing the shots and dancing a little with the guests, I asked one of the girls who was working on the same tour what was the protocol for completing the job.

- Now that we're in the third club and serving the drinks, you can leave any time you like.

I didn't think twice. I left without saying goodbye and took a taxi straight to the hostel. Aware of the taxi drivers' mischief, I opened the phone map and informed him that I would follow the route.

The next afternoon, Osman came to tell me that the volunteer house was full and that I couldn't stay there for the next few days. In addition, the hostel also had all the beds occupied by a group of young religious who would be in Istanbul all week.

- I also have nowhere to sleep and would like to suggest for both of us to share the expenses of an Airbnb. It will be cheaper than a hostel and is much more comfortable. What do you say?

I couldn't say anything, but I didn't like the idea at all, mainly because the night before Osman wanted to be with me and I said no. I didn't want to be rude to him because I really wanted to keep the paid job. I already had two customers for the next pub crawl, which already guaranteed me 10 euros.

After a few hours, Osman came to my side with some flats on his cell phone screen. I was very bothered to have to say no for the second time to the guy who was now my "boss," but I really needed to do that. I needed to assert my will.

- Osman, I appreciate the suggestion to share a place, but I won't be comfortable with you in the same space. I prefer to stay in a hostel

nearby and keep working on the pub crawl. I hope you understand.

He made a surprised expression but accepted my decision. He tried to justify that he would never try anything with me if that was my concern, but we came to an agreement and I kept working on the party tour.

Satisfied to express my will, I took a shared room less than two kilometers away and went out to dinner alone, feeling very good about my assertiveness.

65 – THE NO LESSON

Murat the bartender was the typical Turk of movies. Long black beard. Thick eyebrow and big nose. He always wore jeans and hoodies and met us at the pub crawl always in the middle of the night, after closing the bar, when we were already on our way to the second or third club. I loved meeting him at the bar before the tours start. He was always excited.

We danced in the three nightclubs of the tour. I distributed the flower tiaras to everyone and said no to Osman once more. At the end of the night, drunker than usual, I got so excited about Murat's dance and asked him for a kiss. He said no and I stood there for a few seconds in the middle of the dance floor, without understanding what just happened.

All the men in Turkey would stop me in the street to know my name and my nationality. The waiters asked me for my phone and my social media profiles. Why would he, the ugliest Turk of all the ones I had met, reject me? I left the nightclub a little confused.

- Murat rejected me! – I informed my friends outside the club.

- What? – asked the American.

- Not possible! – said the Brazilian.

- It's all right. No one is forced to be with anyone. – I laughed and no one understood.

We staggered through the streets while I had fun with all that had happened.

- Do I have bad breath? Am I smelling? – I laughed raising my arms and smelling my armpits. But deep down I knew very well what that meant.

Each human being has different reasons for accepting and refusing something. It's not always about me.

66 – LOVE WITH GUILT

It was late dawn, almost 4 am when I arrived at the hostel and went straight to bed without changing clothes. When I woke up, I looked at my cell phone and saw a sequence of deleted messages that I had sent to Laurent's number.

After I regretted sending the messages, the cell phone battery ran out and I struggled until the phone went back on and I could erase it without him seeing it.

Two days went by without any news from Laurent and my anxiety only increased. What could have happened? I couldn't quite remember what kind of messages I had sent. But I managed to erase it in time and figured he hadn't seen it.

- I miss you. I hope you haven't seen my drunken messages, – I wrote with an emoji crying with laughter.

- Hi Paula, I'm at a wedding. I am sorry I can not speak. I saw your message. I'm sure what I feel for you is very beautiful, but I can't talk about love right now.

I felt dizziness darken my eyes. I could not believe it. I pulled deep into my memory and the text didn't come exactly, but there was the word: love. Shame was the only thing I felt at that moment. A deep and crushing shame. I wanted to go back in time to undo that stupid message.

I remembered my coach advising me to look for the learning that a difficult situation brought, but there was no learning there. I already knew there was no point in sending him that kind of message. Of course I didn't love him. I didn't even mean exactly that. I was just excited about everything I felt about him. Love was too much for any sensible person. I had already written about those feelings in my reflective journal and knew it to be a ridiculous and exaggerated rush. Even so, it was done. Once again, I couldn't go back in time and that feeling consumed me.

I apologized. I explained that I was a bit drunk that night. I said that I was also not ready to talk about love with anyone. All in vain. Laurent never answered again.

I spent all day consuming by guilt and shame. By then, I wasn't even worried about not speaking to Laurent ever again. I was embarrassed to have played a teenager in front of a boy 10 years younger than me. I was worried about his judgment of me. That was it.

I walked four kilometers to the shore of the Bosphorus strait, the channel that connects the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea and marks the border between the European and Asian continents. The day was

cloudy like my heart and it was windy. I jumped the wide concrete wall and walked balancing on the rocks until I found a flat rock where I could sit.

I wanted that regret and shame to leave me alone for just a few minutes. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, concentrating on all the noises around me. The sound of the water hitting the rocks and the boats moored a few feet away from me. The singing of gulls flying over the fishing boats and the horns and the roar of the car engines behind me. People talking far away in a language impossible to interpret and a distant radio playing a lively song. The wind blew across my face and also made a particular noise near my ears. I kept quiet, searching for new noises until I felt that my guilty heart was calm. The self-judgment finally paused and I heard my inner voice.

- It is better to love than to hate. No matter what you say, each person will understand the message one way. This is not within your reach. No matter what love means to him. It only matters what love means to you. Because your feeling exists only within yourself. This is your chance to find out what real love is for you.

I cried silently and with deep peace. I had just gained the opportunity to use “I love you” much more sincerely next time. It was strong what I still felt for Laurent, but it had more to do with a longing for love.

67 – ENDLESS TEARS

In Izmir, I was comfortably staying at Mariana's house, who I met in my first night in Istanbul, and her husband, Murilo. They had a contagious energy and they took me on fantastic walks in Ephesus. In Izmir, I finally managed to buy a new backpack, since the makeshift seam I made on the straps of my old backpack was about to break.

I arrived in Cappadocia more emotional than ever. It was after midnight and I went straight to the bedroom. The shared rooms were next to the individual ensuite in Fairy Chimneys, as the rock formations in the Goreme region are called. There was a large porch excavated at the base, and my room was a deep tunnel, with several open-topped beds in the stone walls, just like I had dreamed of when I thought of Cappadocia.

It was very cold at dawn and the 3C degree cold made me thankful for not leaving my snow jacket along the way. Before arriving in the European summer, I had last worn the black nylon goose-down overcoat in Canada on a date with Jordan. I spent the entire European summer thinking of a way to send off the dead volume to Brazil. In Portugal, I had the best chance: my friend would travel to Brazil in less than a month and I almost sent the coat back through her. I could only attribute the decision to keep it to what they call the collective unconscious.

The breakfast was not the most exciting. Tomatoes with cucumbers were definitely not my favorite breakfast in Turkey, and in Cappadocia I gave everything to Fadila, the stray dog that lived in the hostel. That morning I fed Fadila with the vegetables and had only chai, accompanied by an old bread with butter. Then I walked to the top of a nearby mountain.

When I reached the top and saw the endless horizon from the Fairy Chimneys, I felt an indescribable happiness to be there. I'd never imagined I could get this far. When I saw some scenes from the famous Brazilian soap opera set in Cappadocia, I could have never imagined that I would be there in person one day.

I let that cry of happiness and achievement wet my face and exploded painfully and intensely from inside me. Alone on top of the mountain, I sobbed and tried to understand where those tears came from. Was the break-up with Laurent hurting more than I imagined? I couldn't say. The freezing wind tore my face exactly where the tears ran. I was trying to name that confusing rollercoaster of emotions but I couldn't.

Since I was born in the south of Brazil, in the coldest month of the year, I thought the cold could be connecting me with some

emotion from my childhood. Combining the misunderstanding with Laurent, the joy of being in Cappadocia, and the anxiety about getting to know to the unfamiliar Thailand, I realized it was just the sum of many events.

I walked the region admiring the handicraft, the unique architecture and the landscape. At a café in the evening, I checked my cell phone and realised that the weather conditions for the next day were not favorable for the famous balloon ride. It was supposed to snow that nightI. So I booked a tour in the mountains, canyons, and Selime Cathedral, the largest cathedral carved on a rock on the planet.

I had a traditional kebab for dinner paying under $20 and ran to my cave to shelter myself from the cold. The only two jeans I had in my backpack weren't enough to warm me up. Good thing I had my jacket, affectionately nicknamed the bear, because it wrapped me in a single, comfortable hug. "I'm glad I didn't let you go, Teddy bear."

68 – CHATTING WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS

I could only see a blue door slightly open. I knew what was inside and that was the reason why I was afraid to come in. I was tormented and scared, but I couldn't make any noise. No one could know I was there. I walked slowly and found a dirty dark bar with overturned metal tables on the burnt cement floor. My father was injured, lying next to a dead man. That was what I feared to see.

I put my old father on my right shoulder and walked away with difficulty. It was early dawn and I started walking down a dark alley at the bottom of a gorge with many rocks. Something told me it wasn't safe to take my father to the hospital even though I knew he needed medical treatment.

- I don't want you to die, dad, but I don't want anyone to take you away from me either. What should I do? Tell me please.

I woke up with this uneasy feeling and for a second I thought the cave walls where I had been sleeping were the dark alley where I tried to save my father. It was a strange dream and I spent the day wondering if it had any hidden meaning. Some message from the universe.

The snow that had fallen during the night made Cappadocia even more beautiful. When the van stopped at an observation deck with olive trees covered with ribbons, pieces of pottery, and different types of nazar – also called the Greek eye or the Turkish eye, I saw the fairy chimneys covered with a layer of white snow and I cried again. I knew I deserved to be there seeing that beauty with my own eyes. If I didn't deserve it, I wouldn't have come this far. I can't express how special I felt.

We hiked through the Ihlara Valley, a 100-meter-high canyon, squeezed between two volcanoes that lead to the Melendiz River and also house millennial Byzantine caves and churches. Throughout the four miles, I could hear the trees swinging their leaves in the breeze that chilled my face. The birds and the water sliding over the stones wrapped up the perfect melody for the hike. I preferred to walk away from the group and stroll in silence, still trying to understand my emotions. I cried a few more times, searching my mind for the connections my unconscious was making to raise that urge to cry.

The night before, I had texted Simone, my coach, and she told me our unconscious is constantly associating events around us, triggering emotions already known and felt at other times. She suggested that the time of year might give us a clue, but I didn't even know what day

of the week I was, let alone the month.

I said a prayer of appreciation inside the main wing of the Selime Monastery. Whatever was releasing that whirlwind of emotions had some purpose, even though I couldn't understand it.

When I got to my room that evening, I opened Facebook and read the memory of the day. "Six years ago," I read a post I've made to invite my friends and family for my father's funeral. I remembered the dream I had the previous night and everything made sense. It was not a warning, it was so unconscious that it brought up one of the most painful moments in my history. The loss of the greatest man of my life. It was so obvious that I couldn't believe it.

I took my reflective journal and wrote down everything I felt when my father passed away. I remembered having an overwhelming urge to cry, I saw and heard my sister sobbing the cry I wanted to let go, but I kept myself blocked. It added to my pain. "Why can't I cry when the pain is unbearable?" I asked myself in my journal and then I went to sleep.

69 – BRIGHT BALLOONS AND A PATERNAL SMILE

The alarm went off at 4am. It was my last day in Cappadocia and my last chance to see the traditional hot air balloons in the sky. I put on my two pairs of jeans again one on top of the other and all the socks I had in my luggage to make up for the cold in my legs. I ran outside anxiously to see if the snow had not fallen again. The hostel reception was already open and that was a good sign.

- The balloons will fly today. There are still two spots. Do you wanna go? – Joab, the young receptionist, asked me.

- Only if it was a gift, honey. 170 euros is a fortune for a backpacker like me! – I thanked him and set off on foot to the mountain where I cried in the morning of the first day.

Reaching the top, I looked for a place where there weren't so many tourists, positioned my tripod and sat waiting for the sunrise. Below, it was possible to see the flames igniting and inflating the first balloons. It would be nice to fly, but I was already happy to watch them soar.

It was still 40 minutes before sunrise, and it was obvious that the first balloons would take off only when the first rays appeared on the horizon. I thought of my father again and my difficulty in crying in moments of shock. I remembered when my 12-year-old Labrador retriever died. Felipe cried copiously in the car as I looked at her lifeless body in the back seat. She was the most important thing in our lives, it hurt deeply to know that I would no longer have her faithful company when washing dishes or mowing the lawn. But I couldn't shed any tears.

I remembered other moments of pain, when our marriage was almost over. It was as if a gigantic rock closed my heart and did not allow emotions to manifest in their wholeness. I couldn't figure out what this blockage was, but I was glad I could finally cry all the mourning that was my dear father's departure. I'm glad I had the chance to understand that some pains weren't mine. I'm glad I could tell him how much I loved him and recognize the sweet, loving father he had always tried to be. It was good to realise he was the best father he could have been.

As the sun started rising, tears were still running on my face and I felt his presence by my side. I knew he was there, sitting beside me on that ice-cold cliff.

- Who would have thought you'd be with me in Turkey, huh dad?

- I am with you everywhere.

The bright colorful balloons were rising in the dark blue sky that was lighting up softly. One by one. Everywhere. They were like sparkling prayers in search of the heart of God.

- Thanks for stopping the snow, Dad.

- That’s the way I found it to say I love you.

70 – FREEZING CONNECTION IN MOSCOW

I left my Uber at Red Square and looked for my cellphone to check how long I had to explore Moscow. I still didn't know I could schedule a longer connection in the city, but I was happy to have a few hours to see sights in Russia's largest city.

A fine drizzle fell from the dark gray Moscow sky, and even before I reached the History Museum and the Resurrection Gate, I was already chattering my teeth.

I took some pictures with the tripod and the cellphone timer and walked to St. Basil's Cathedral which, with its colorful domes, made me feel like I was standing before a playful, childlike palace. I took a few more pictures until my hands almost froze without gloves, and I finally walked out in search of a shelter to escape from the drizzle that was getting thicker.

I walked down a brightly lit sidewalk and got into a cool café. The weather was not favorable to visit the city better, so I could only try to make some different types of connection. I decided to do something new and introduced myself to a very short black-haired girl wearing blue acrylic glasses.

- Hi, I'm Paula from Brazil. Do you mind if I sit here with you? – I asked paying attention to the curious expression on her face.

- Lisa from Latvia – she said, raising her right hand and lifting her face to see me through the lens, – make yourself comfortable.

- I hope you don't find it strange, but the weather's horrible out there and I only have a few hours until I get back to the airport. So I'd like to do something useful, like knowing a different story- I explained, figuring she might find it inconvenient. – Please let me know if I'm getting in the way. Or if you don't wanna talk. I promise I'll understand, – I said slowly, searching for the best words in my English.

- Do not worry. That might be interesting. – She smiled.

Lisa was 25 years old and she was studying something like international relations at MGIMO University. I remember because I Googled it to make sure I understood her story. She had been living in Moscow for less than a year and she explained briefly about the political relations between Latvia and Russia. Soon she wanted to know where I was going and the conversation ended around my trip.

Lisa was impressed to learn that I was 37 years old and had been married for 14 year. Although she didn't tell me everything in detail, she felt comfortable talking to me about her parents' relationship, and

that night I was aware that my story impacted people, mainly, because of the way I see things and the positive attitude I had embraced to face everything.

- Thank you so much for sitting with me. You're very brave and you should write a book – she said when we said goodbye after two hours of talking.

- Thanks. I'm already planning on it, – I explained, thanking her for allowing me to approach her.

I left the cafe thinking about how much the relationship of Lisa's parents influenced her view of her life and the relationships she has had. I also thought about how my parents' story may have influenced my life and relationships as an adult. Probably a lot more than I thought.

I stopped in front of a musician singing "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran, and my mind carried me into Jordan's arms in Toronto. It was impossible to hear that song without remembering it. I missed him and I even rehearsed a message on my cell phone, but I soon put it away. I think I felt closer to him listening to the melody than trying to read between the lines of the vague answers he would probably send me.

I walked for almost 40 minutes, trying to find an underground station. My cell phone map didn't match the territory, and the bitter cold made me give up and go into some other café to use their wifi to call an Uber.

I spent another night at an airport somewhere in the world sleeping over my backpacks.

71 – A PUNCH OF ENERGY

I could feel the change in the atmosphere as soon as I got into the taxi from the Bangkok airport. Through the window of the car, I could see a huge, vibrant city with such striking contrasts that it could not be denied: the arrival in Asia was not just a change of continent, it was the beginning of a completely new phase not only in my journey, but in my whole life.

There was no one to welcome me when I arrived at the school where I would teach English for the next 20 days. I had applied to teach singing to children from two to four years old, but by then I knew I would be an English teacher. That wouldn't change much, since I was actually thinking of teaching the alphabet using English songs for children.

The gate was unlocked when the school-hired driver dropped me in front of the colorful three-story building. Since I left Suvarnabhumi Airport, I could feel a warmth that didn't exactly come from the hot sun, like in Italy. Bangkok's dry damp haze was more like an internal fever that made the body itself radiate heat.

Outside the glass door was a small shelf full of shoes and a sign: "Take off your shoes." I didn't understand the requirement right away, because the floor inside was as dirty as it was outside, so I kept my old pair of black sneakers.

I climbed the stairs and found only empty rooms on the second floor. I kept going, and on the top floor I saw another glass door through which I could hear voices.

- Hello. Is anyone there?

- Hi, are you the volunteer? – a skinny and nice girl came to meet me. If it wasn't for the bun in her hair, I'd say she was a porcelain doll, with white skin, pretty pink lips and green eyes.

- Yes. I'm Paula from Brazil. – I smiled, pulling my backpacks away.

- Brazil! Me too! – Flávia began to speak in Portuguese immediately – Come on and let's take your luggage to the room. Things here are pretty messy, but you soon get used to it.

The volunteers' accommodation was basically a huge hall, separated in half by a PVC room divider. On one side, the female and male bedrooms, divided by a white tarp, each with two bunk beds. There was also a single bed with multiple mattresses, a small sofa, a desk, and a small bookcase swung in the large living room that connected the bedrooms.

The other half of the room was probably the kitchen. A makeshift counter with three office desks covered in grubby, sticky plastic filled

the wall below the window. A dirty yellow microwave in the corner, an aluminum cabinet with two doors, and a tiny fridge completed the space. The kitchen sink was placed in the men's toilet instead of a washbasin and there was no sink in the ladies' room.

- The girls' shower doesn't work either. So we use the bathroom in the principal's office or the handheld shower. – Flávia laughed, making everything lighter.

- What a mess we got ourselves into, huh? And we still have to pay a deposit for the bedding? I increased the dose of laughter. – I hope the classes are rewarding.

- Don't count on that. I spend only 30 minutes a day with the kids. It's enjoyable, but I was expecting a richer experience – Flavia complained.

As we planned to go out in search of food for lunch, another volunteer arrived at the school. Kate's eyes were expressive and well-defined by black eyeliner. She wore colorful pantaloons, a baggy white T-shirt, flip-flops, and a handcrafted pouch strapped to her waist. A native of the Canary Islands, her English had a slurred Spanish accent, but very easy to understand.

That afternoon, as we walked through Bangkok's grungy streets full of street merchants, I felt as if a portal separated me from everything I had experienced in the past months. It was as if my divorce had happened decades ago. I felt so far away from everything that even if I missed Jordan or Laurent that was now irrelevant. Everything was absolutely new and I started to realize that the universe was much more vast than my mind could conceive.

Small sidewalk tables displayed plastic bags of soup, rice, vegetables, and whatever was possible to pack for travel. Vendors used only a little stove, a pan and a single spoon to prepare any variety in the menu, and the tools were never washed.

On the first impact I wondered if I could feed myself properly in Asia. On a whim, the only thing I wanted was to run to a convenience store and buy bread, noodles, and cookies for the rest of my stay. That afternoon I surrendered to two bags of chopped watermelons and pineapples. I decided to disregard the dirty nails of the Thai woman who cut the fruits and received the money at the same time.

As we boarded the boat which worked as an underground, transporting passengers to both sides of the Chao Phraya River, I became proud of my journey and decided to open my mind to the cultural differences arising in front of me. What a wonderful opportunity to know other possibilities of living.

I couldn't help but think of the religious leaders I've met in Catholicism and Protestantism, who live alienated within a tiny bubble, unaware of the magnitude of Buddhism, Islamism, or so many

other beliefs and religions around the world. Arriving in Asia has increased my perception, at least slightly, of how vast and endless the universe is.

When we arrived at the Wat Arum, the Temple of Dawn, I started to understand the local culture better and I was ashamed I didn't take off my shoes when I arrived at school that morning. Being barefoot is a sign of spiritual respect and "hygiene" in Asia. Shoes are taken off anywhere: temples, hotels and even some bars and restaurants.

Women should keep their shoulders and legs covered within the temples where everyone is on their knees or sit with their legs bent on their side, always keeping their soles turned back, never facing the Buddha images.

In the late afternoon, we sat in a nice bar facing the boat station and we ordered a beer. He served three bottles, and just a few days later we understood that the 600 ml bottle is the Asian long necked version.

Across the river, the sun was setting behind another Buddhist temple. The gentle mist that covered the sky that October afternoon drew a mixture of geometric shadows on the sunlight giving the landscape an air of surrealist painting. The reddish fireball, surrounded by lines in various shades of orange, was the perfect image of the eastern sun that had fed my imagination for many years.

72 – THE JOY OF THE UNEXPECTED AND A DELIGHTFUL ROUTINE

Every time the kindergarten's door was opened, the Thai children celebrated our arrival with loud noise, sending a contagious energy throughout the place. It was the happiest 30 minutes of my day. Those curious, narrowed-eyes paid attention to all the drawings I scribbled on the whiteboard.

If the letter of the day was G, I would unleash my creativity with giraffes, guitars, and little girls, writing next to each picture the corresponding name with the well-placed initial letter. Kate and Flavia would leave some songs prepared and music time was the most anticipated moment for the little ones, who would raise euphoric waving their arms around the teachers. Kaplan, a Turkish volunteer, would also be in some classes with us.

On the third day, the director came to our accomodation and explained with some difficulty that the next day would hold something different. He introduced himself as John, but we were all sure that his Thai name was completely different. However, the Facebook letters were impossible to decipher.

- Three girls. Tomorrow. 12pm Below. Muslim school. – John gestured, repeating the same words over and over again.

- Tomorrow the three of us are going to the Muslim school and we should be ready downstairs at 12 noon, right? – Flavia and I were formulating the sentence, but John looked at us with a huge question mark on his face and repeated everything again.

- Three girls. Tomorrow. 12pm Below. Muslim school.

The next day, after singing with the little ones in kindergarten, the three of us were sitting in the cafeteria's mini-chairs waiting for something different. The postman was talking quietly to the school janitor, sitting at one of the tables while sipping a glass of water and fanning himself with his cap. Neither of them spoke English, but they seemed to be talking about us, since they looked at us analytically while smiling at each other.

After 30 minutes of waiting, three motorcyclists parked in front of the school and, with mimes, the janitor told us to go with those strangers. The three men spoke the same English as the postman and the janitor: zero. Laughing at the unexpected, we look at each other and face the challenge.

- I don't think it's optional,- I shouted, climbing on the backseat.

- There`s no helmet. God protects us, – Flavia begged.

- Here we go! – Kate shouted in a funny cartoon voice.

It was one of the most fun experiences of my life: face the chaotic traffic of Bangkok without a helmet on the back of a complete stranger who spoke no English, having no idea where he was taking me. The three of us shouted the whole way and made our riders laugh with our childish excitement.

When the motorbikes entered the courtyard before a mosque, we finally discovered exactly what the Muslim school was.

The teachers who received us also did not speak English. They just handed in a paper to each of us with the school days and times and took us to our classes.

The group of about ten 8-year-olds immediately got up, greeting me in English:

- Good afternoon teacher!

They all wore pink T-shirts, and the girls, in a bigger number, wore skirts below their knees and their heads were wrapped in a white garment that completely covered their hair and neck.

I started by introducing my name and my country. Pronouncing “Brazil” started a real fuss. Noisy and wild as teenagers are, they screamed over who knew more about my homeland.

- Neymar
- Football
- The Amazon

In less than a minute, I had completely lost control over the class. They threw rubbers at each other and they didn’t seem to mind my requests for silence. Annoyed, I grabbed my purse and the bottle of water the monitor handed me as soon as I walked in and threatened to leave.

- I’ll ask them to look for another teacher for you. – The buzz decreased and it broke my heart to hear their apologies in the middle of the class.

- Please, teacher, stay.
- We’re truly sorry. Stay Please.

I went back to the center of the room and said slowly, with the easiest English I could speak, that I would like everyone’s support so we could learn together. I created a signal so they would be silent and immediately return to their seats when things got too euphoric, but my clenched fist was completely ignored at the first opportunity, even when I desperately climbed onto my chair to try to impose some respect.

Teaching that group was extremely exhausting, but also very funny. Those brats were rebellious like a pack of wild hyenas, but they knew how to win me, and I was so glad to have to walk four miles in the sweltering heat of Bangkok to teach them three or four new words each class.

At least the second class was more obedient. A room with eight students around 12 years old was interesting and had something very special. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I saw a huge potential in those young kids. Questioning and curious, I was always asked to repeat a lesson and frequently asked grammatical questions that sometimes I myself could not answer. And that was fascinating.

- Okay, boys, sometimes, I get the impression we're on the same level of English here, so let's learn together, okay? Unceremoniously, I would pull out my cell phone and give them the information I have just discovered on Google myself.

I saw myself somehow in those students. Sometimes rebellious and wild, sometimes interested and attentive to life's lessons and so often singing and enjoying myself as a small child in the most pleasurable situations.

After my first class given at the Muslim school, I already had a very well structured routine. Three mornings a week I would teach English literacy classes to the little ones and two afternoons I would teach English to my two teenage groups. The rest of the time, I could use to explore Bangkok's temples and bars.

73 – TUK-TUK AND THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE

That Wednesday afternoon, Flavia and I just followed the directions of Kate, who had a map that showed directions to the Golden Mount Temple on her cell phone. The heat in the early afternoon was even more intense and we stopped under a sunroom on a corner to check the route and hydrate the body.

- You girls look lost. Can I help you? – A Thai man wearing jeans, a shirt, and fancy shoes approached us unexpectedly.

- We're going to the Golden Mount Temple. It's the next street on the right, isn't it? – Kate replied, showing the map.

- Yes, but the temple is closed. It opens only at 4 pm, – he said, showing his clock displaying 2:30. – If you have no other plans, I can tell you what to do.- Have you got a pen?

I found that very strange, but everything happened so quickly that we couldn't even reason. The unknown Thai, who spoke English very well, wrote three directions on the paper.

- Take the governmental tuk-tuk, the one which has the Thai flag. It will charge you 40 baht and take you to all the three places. It'll stay with you for 3 hours and drop you off at Golden Mount at the end of the tour. The stranger waved to the tuk-tuk and led us. – See? the Thailand's flag, they are cheaper. Give the driver the paper. You will pay only 40 baths each for the entire ride. Have fun.

We got into the vehicle quite suspiciously but without resistance. If this was some kind of tourist scam or kidnapping, we would have been the easiest victims in history. If it was some kind of trap, at least we would have been happy victims.

Our driver turned up the sound, which was playing some kind of very funny Thai pop and turned on a light globe on the canvas roof. We danced and laughed wildly, making videos in the city streets and waving at the cars that passed us. Thanks to the eastern gods, everything went well and the first stop was a temple we didn't know yet. The driver waited outside as we went into the place.

We came back to the car still wondering how we got into such a crazy tour and what was the intention of that well-dressed Thai. When we stopped at the second destination, we figured that he probably earned commission from that travel agency.

A bald man with a foreign face and accent poured us some coffee and presented a book with various options for sightseeing around the city. We took note of some prices to compare later, and we were a little embarrassed to leave without buying anything. That's when I

had an idea.

My next volunteer was already confirmed on the island of Koh Phangan, where the Full Moon party, one of Thailand's most famous festivals, is held every month. Since I have decided to go to Thailand, I knew I wanted to go to this party. Being able to stay for free at a hostel on the same beach where it would happen had already made me extremely happy, but Koh Phangan was almost 20 hours away by bus and the airline tickets I found on the search sites were very expensive.

Our bald friend got me a flight for less than half the price I found online plus a ferry ticket to the island included. Kate decided to go to the same island with me and we bought two tickets. The seller was happy and so were we.

The third suggested stop on the paper was a silk kimono shop. Of course, none of us were interested in buying Thai kimonos that cost $500. Still, we looked and praised the pieces, declining all offers and we left thanking for the attention. Our friend had already secured his commission from the travel agency and that was good enough.

We watched the sunset from the temple high above the Golden Mount and I thanked deeply and quietly for all the unexpected things I had been living in Bangkok. When I was in Canada, I thought nothing would be more special than the amazing rendezvous Jordan had planned. When I was proposed at Temple Bar in Dublin, I thought I couldn't be even happier. When Laurent said he would miss me in Greece, I wondered what I could still live that would be more beautiful than those days in the Mediterranean. So the universe gave me Bangkok, with one day more amazing than the other. I cried in silence and hardly knew that the day was still far from being over.

74 – THE PING-PONG SHOW AND THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE

At about 7 pm, we left the Golden Temple and picked up a new tuk-tuk heading to the Chinatown Street Food Fair, the home and work of many Chinese immigrants in Thailand.

Street sellers selling fruit, clothes and pirate electronic devices spread themselves along the sidewalk invading even the car space. Hundreds of restaurants and the frenetic shouting of taxi drivers and tuk-tuk drivers fighting for the public attention mingled with the dirt and the bright panels on the storefronts.

Bangkok is much more than a vibrant city, it is a living organism that pulses energy in all its streets and temples.

Still scared of the street food, I persuaded my friends to join me in a restaurant where I could find a bathroom to wash my hands. After dinner we set off for Patpong Night Market hoping to find the famous ping-pong shows where Asian women perform bizarre pompoir performances.

Although we were under the impression that the day had lasted more than 72 hours, the three of us were full of energy to continue exploring the city.

Ping-pong shows are prohibited in Thailand, but they are as easy to find as traditional flowered shirts or scorpion kebabs. With every step taken on the bustling streets of Patpong Market you hear Thai people making clicking noises and announcing loudly, “ping pong show, ping pong show!”

- You pay 100 baht for a beer, this is the entrance fee. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to pay for the show. Come in, see and go away, – explained the second Thai we approached. The offer was the same and we thought it was worth the experience.

We arrived at the dark, practically empty bar led by our illegal guide and lady boy with makeup on led us to a table in front of the counter. It was a typical striptease house similar to the ones we see in movies, with pole-dancers on a catwalk full of half naked girls dancing. The only difference, there was no Hollywood glamor. Peeling walls, a cement counter, and uneven tiled floors contrasted with the tiny globe of mirrors hanging from the ceiling with exposed electrical wiring.

Despite the bizarre atmosphere and the unattractive appearance of the dancers, I was finding the whole experience very interesting. Two skinny Asians, wearing seductive lingerie, sat at our table offering us red drinks of suspicious origin.

- Não toquem nas bebidas, meninas. Eu não pretendo ser uma turista do sexo feminino roubada por prostitutas tailandesas[18] – I shouted in Portuguese, hoping my Spanish friend would also understand.

When they realized our interest was just pure curiosity, the call girls handed us ping-pong rackets and left us alone.

With just one more table taken by a couple of tourists, the show began with a huge birthday cake and colorful balloons being brought to the center of the stage. An Asian woman raised her right leg, just like a dog does when peeing, blowing out the candles. On my right side, Flavia screamed in disbelief and covered her mouth with her hands, while Kate looked at me with the same astonishment.

Then, as other girls carried the cake backstage, the Asian girl laid on the floor in a roast chicken position, stuffed something between her legs, and popped the air balloons by throwing three darts from her vagina, which also smoked a cigarette. At the same time, another young woman next to her, also without panties, immediately got up from a deep squat and displayed what she had just written on a paper on the floor: Hello!

Another young woman appeared on the catwalk, pulling from within her body more than two meters of something that looked like a Hawaiian necklace, full of plastic flowers. Immediately afterwards, ping-pong balls were launched from all sides. Kate gave a desperate shout warning that she was hit in the face by one of the balls. Just imagining having any part of my body touched by such a ball, I felt a shiver of disgust.

We shouted at the waitress and we were told to go to the bar to pay for the beers. I was so nervous I didn't realize if the show was over or not. When we got to the counter, a huge Thai girl who looked more like a sumo wrestler said in a deep voice:

- It's 4,500 baht.

I looked in disbelief at Flavia. That was equivalent to $600. We objected and the Thai shouted:

One thousand baht for the show and 500 baths for beer. It's 1,500 baht for each.

We tried to argue by saying that the waitress and the guide told us that the beer costs 100 baht, but we were not even heard. The sumo wrestler got up from her chair and shouted even louder, threatening to call the security guards. Afraid of aggression or worse, we decided to pay the required amount and get out of there as soon as possible.

We left the bar in despair, looking for a place to negotiate the value of tuk-tuk to the school accommodation. We were outraged. By Thailand's consumption patterns, $600 was a lot of money. But it

wasn't the money taken that bothered me, it was have lived such an amazing day but at the same time having to go back home with that bad feeling.

- Girls, I refuse to go to sleep so full of indignation and regret for choosing to watch the show. The amount of money lost there pays very well for the laughter we will have by telling this story in the future. I want to have at least one beer before we leave – I explained in loosen English.

We spent a few minutes discussing how much we would pay for each bottle after leaving almost R$200 each with the giant Thai, when Kate came up with a great idea.

- There is a supermarket on the back street. Beer must be half the price there. – Her eyes widened with hope. And the day was not over yet.

75 – BEER ON THE SIDEWALK AND THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE

Each of us with a 600ml long-necked beer bottle in hand, we sat on a cement bench under the window of a jewelry store right next to the supermarket and I tried to convince the girls, and myself, that the blow in the show could have been much worse.

- Think with me. Tree girls alone! If she asked 5,000 baht each, we would find a way to pay. I do not regret it. At least I'll tell my friends that I've been in a prohibited ping pong show on my trip around the world and I will still have an exciting turn when I tell the story. – I continued my reasoning – And now we have learned to ask as often as necessary to be sure about the value of tourist attractions. Everything has a lesson. At least that was fun to learn, – I said, proud of my own conclusions.

- Cheers to the exciting adventures that travelling brings! – Kate lifted the bottle, pulling another toast!

- To the genital herpes on Kate's face! – I mocked, causing laughter.

- To travelers who drink in front of the supermarket! – said a handsome blond young man, tapping his beer in the bottle of his friend by his side, as handsome as he was. – Fernando and Martin of Argentina, he said, approaching us.

In less than 40 minutes, we already had a plastic box serving as a table, two more used as seats, and we've found very clean toilets inside the supermarket. We set up a private bar in the middle of the sidewalk and best of all: cold beer for less than half the price.

- The blonde is mine, – Kate said, patting the makeshift table as the boys came in to buy another round of beers.

It was very clear that Fernando had been keeping an eye on Flavia since he approached us. Martin was shy and showed no interest in anyone, but not Fernando. Fernando couldn't hide that he was really interested in Flavia. And it was exactly him that Kate wanted.

After two rounds of beer, we bought the third and went out to watch the movement of the area. We danced down the street in front of several bars, since the music in almost all of them was extremely loud. At one of these dance stops, Martin pulled me around the waist and gave me a kiss. Everyone was surprised and asked how this had happened. I had no idea.

I thought it was the perfect time for Fernando and Flávia. But Flavia was too shy to show interest. Besides, Kate was throwing all her charm on the Argentinian and I think it intimidated Flavia even more.

She was also keeping an eye on Fernando, but she didn't want to start a competition.

When we got back to the market to buy another round of beers, Kate attacked. With even less shame after drinking, she squeezed Fernando's ass and when he turned around to understand what was going on, she didn't even let him finish the question, she wrapped her left arm over his shoulders and gave him a kiss.

- What the fuck? – I asked Flávia in English. She looks at me with a surprised expression, indignation and compliance at the same time. But just on our way home, I was able to talk about that mess in very fast Portuguese, so that Kate couldn't understand.

- I was sure you would be with the blonde, – I told Flavia, avoiding uttering names so as not to leave clues while Kate looked outside the tuk-tuk with a drunken smile on her face.

- I thought so too, but our friend didn't give a break, right? – Flavia replied smiling, in a way all that conversation seemed irreverent.

- But it was clear he was into you. Why didn't you do something? – I asked angrily because that was exactly what I would have done.

Flavia made a "fuck this shit" face and then Kate interrupted:

- Good thing we stopped for another beer.

- That's true – Flavia and I agreed.

Now, the day was finally over.

76 -THAI NIGHTS

Flavia, Kate and I decided to book a hostel over the weekend near Khaosan Road, the famous backpacker street in central Bangkok. There are 12 bunk beds and air conditioning in the room, it was very dark at night, and there were curtains in each bed, ensuring minimal privacy.

Our only obligation on Friday was the 30-minute singing with the kindergarten kids. After that, we set off for our day off. Flávia and I booked for Saturday afternoon a tour in the floating and the train market. Kate chose to do something different on her own.

The bathroom inside the room was unisex and there were three shower booths and three toilets. The warm shower was a real spa, considering I was washing my hair with a handheld shower for a week. The only inconvenience was having to change clothes inside the shower, where there was no shelves or hooks. But who could complain after a relaxing shower with generous water pressure rising from above?

We put on some makeup and went out looking for some fun. Strange as it was for us, used to Bangkok's "suburb" prices, everything seemed extremely expensive in the tourist region, until we converted the currency and realized that a bottle of beer was about the same price as in Brazil. I believe that because people always say Thailand is a very cheap country, Flavia and I expected even lower prices than those charged. But the massive tourism has changed Thai fame greatly.

We chose a random bar because of the music and the beer price. The waiter opened three large bottles.

- This is awesome! Kate's eyes widened, raising her bottle for the first toast.

The lead singer and guitarist, the only overweight Thai I've ever seen in the entire country, greeted us with a bunch of top-quality international rock songs. In the meantime, a Brazilian funk shook us and also cheered some tourists at a larger table, which took over part of a road with restricted traffic.

When I met Kate on my way to the restroom, I saw that she was excited talking in Spanish with a group of five men.

- They're Spanish too, – she said, opening her left arm and introducing me in the conversation.

I introduced myself and immediately noticed a different look coming from Juan, the tallest and, in my opinion, the most handsome of the five.

Big green eyes, curly hair combed with fingers to the left and

expressive face. Finally, someone about my age after the “crop” of ten-year-younger guys.

By the time I got back from the restroom, Kate was already providing seating for all her new friends at our table. Strategically, she opened a single space for Juan beside her and placed everyone else between Flavia and me. In the end, Juan was facing me, diagonally across the table.

Lots of talk and a few shots later, Juan was staring at me without any shame. Even so, I thought it was best to ask someone under less influence of alcohol.

- Darling, help me make sure if this Spanish is hitting on me or on Kate – I approached Flávia, between empty bottles on the table.

- Even the singer may have noticed that he is all over you. Only Kate doesn’t see it, or pretends not to, – she said matter-of-factly.

I was definitely not willing to let things go in the same direction as the night we met the Argentinans. We struggled to split the bill among all members on the table. And whenever Kate counted the bills, the sum went wrong. While everyone was trying to agree on our next stop, I got up and went to the restroom. On my way back, instead of taking my seat, I called Juan into the bar and avoided paying attention to everyone’s eyes, especially Kate’s. Inside, I was more than direct:

- Why do you look at me so much?

- Because you are so beautiful – he replied, sceptical of my attitude.

- Can I kiss you? I asked with a frightening self-confidence even I found hard to believe. Juan’s response was to pull me by the hand and kiss me hard.

When we got back to the table, holding hands, everyone knew what had happened, since from our table it was possible to see everything that happened inside the bar. Besides, we made no point in hiding it. Kate tried to mask her irritation with a smile, but I could feel how she condemned me with her eyes.

77 – RECOVERING PANTIES AND FRIENDSHIPS

My head was throbbing and I was feeling sick to my stomach because of the hangover. Two pieces of toast, scrambled eggs, and a cup of unsweetened black coffee seemed like a good idea to aid my recovery, while Flavia told me her perceptions of my attitude the night before.

Kate arrived from the Spanish hostel with her eyes smudged and her hair in a clumsy bun on the top of her head.

- You forgot something last night, – she said, throwing a black lycra panties on the table. Then she turned her back and went into the bedroom without saying good morning.

Flavia looked at me in amazement trying to control the laughter that was about to echo through the bar.

The night before, Kate and the boys broke into the three-bunk room just when Juan was slipping my underwear under the creped skirt I was wearing. No one could see us because we were on the last bed near the wall. Still, I was so embarrassed that I was ashamed to look for my panties in front of everyone and immediately left wearing nothing underneath.

Later, I found Kate fiddling with her cell phone, alone in the hostel bar.

- I imagine you're upset that I made out with Juan last night. I don't think I've done anything wrong, but if it's important to you that I apologize, I will. – I spoke without sitting next to her.

- You can be with anyone you want, Paula. I just didn't expect you to take him away when he was by my side and kiss him in front of everyone, – she said, her voice low, not meeting my eyes.

- Kate – I sat putting my hand on her arm to catch her attention – Juan and I were looking at each other from the time we met, but you completely ignored that. I just don't want us to get angry over some guy that means nothing to either of us.

Kate listened to me quietly but finally admitted:

- You're right. If I advocate that women should be free and do what they want, I can't criticize you for that. Besides, you're right, he's just a guy we met at a bar, not worth a fight. – She smiled, taking a more relaxed posture.

78 – A NEW MEANING

Flavia and I were about the same age, but we were very different in the way we reacted to things and, in a way, similar in the way we felt the world. We've had long conversations daily after school. In the days we spent together in Bangkok, I told Flavia almost my whole life and she also shared hers with me.

Failed relationships, follies of love, abuse, rejection. On her last night in Bangkok, before leaving for Vietnam, Flavia confessed to me some very deep and guilty pains she has carried with her about an abusive relationship she had lived in the past. Listening to those pains, I was sure that the biggest challenge for human beings is to forgive themselves.

Sitting on the brown leather couch at our room, still a little hangover from the Nana Plaza night out, I listened to Flávia telling me about what she thought was a mistake made during such an abusive relationship. A mistake that caused her a huge blame. Although I changed her name here in the book, out of respect, I won't say what it is about. Most importantly, on that muggy, humid night, under the noise of the non-working air conditioner, I could feel Flavia's guilt weighing heavily in my heart.

I listened attentively to the whole story and even the way she regretted not having found the support she was expecting from the people she trusted. I wanted to find the words that would take that pain out of her soul immediately, because for me it was so clear she should not bear such blame. So, I asked myself what was the hardest forgiveness I had ever given myself, and how I had come to it.

It didn't take too much thinking. Felipe immediately popped into my mind, and I was fully convinced that he was already forgiven.

- Flavia, every human being on this planet is doing the best they can, all the time. Accept that back in time, when you made that choice, you were doing the best you could, within the level of awareness you had at that moment. You could not have acted otherwise. And more than that, you did it for your own sake. You were trying to protect yourself. Seek out the lesson this brought you and leave that blame behind.

She responded only with a monosyllable and spent a few minutes staring at the floor and certainly trying to digest what I had said. Meanwhile, my mind made an insane kamikaze at my own words. Like a tunnel light, I saw Felipe looking at me in my mind, in the middle of that room in Rio de Janeiro, in the afternoon of a stuffy Monday. I could almost smell the soda on my hands as he rehearsed the words to reveal what deep down I already knew.

It was for love. He loved me. He recognized all the sacrifices I have made in my life to follow him. He was aware of all that I had just given up, once again, to move with him to another state. He saw me mourn the deaths of four babies. He loved me too much just to have the courage to look into my eyes and say he didn't want me by his side anymore. He loved me too much to simply tell me that for no special reason he was no longer happy with me.

Besides, not wanting to be with me anymore was a right he had. I finally realized how painful it was for him to "dump" me after everything I've done for him, for us. That was the way out he found, causing me pain I couldn't bear again, so I'd make the decision he didn't have the courage to make. Maybe he even thought it would be easier for me if I was angry at him.

In a matter of seconds, as it all lit up inside my head, tears threatened to burst into my eyes at any moment and I ran to the bathroom. Good thing Flavia was lost in her own thoughts and didn't see my watery eyes.

I cried while sitting on the toilet, tears of hurt and pain that I didn't know still existed inside me. There, in that dirty, hot bathroom of a poor school on the outskirts of Bangkok, I believed I made peace with Felipe and the story about the end of my marriage.

I don't know if this was Felipe's truth, I never asked. I only know that this was the acceptance I gave to my own truth.

My friend Flavia left the next morning, and I felt indebted, because I was the one who had won the most from that conversation.

79 – ON MY WAY TO THE SOUTH

My last week in Bangkok passed slowly as the almost nonexistent breeze helped in nothing to refresh the long walk to the Muslim school. The street food was delicious and I was a pro at eating pad thai with chopsticks on paper plates. Still, I didn't taste the insects, because my students assured me that only tourists eat the cockroach, scorpion, and spider kabobs that are sold everywhere.

Prior to Flavia's departure, two boys from Germany joined the volunteer team. Then, two other Brazilians and one Mexican completed the team. Along with Kate, Kaplan, and Conrad, an American with whom I had very little contact, we were in nine teachers now.

We visited the flower market together, and I went with Beatriz, one of the two Brazilians, to Ayutthaya, the first capital of Thailand, when the country was still called Zion.

Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, Ayutthaya is known as the city of the headless Buddhas. A set of millennial temples that fell into ruin after the war with Burma (today known as Myanmar).

We spent one night in the city which today has less than 60,000 inhabitants but has once been one of the most important capitals in Asia, housing a population of 1 million and being compared to Paris, keeping the proportions of the time.

We arrived after a not very comfortable train ride, mainly because of the heat. The return was even more painful as there weren't enough seats for everyone. Beatriz and I went back the nearly 3-hour journey standing, squeezed into a crowded and non air-conditioned wagon.

Still, we couldn't complain about a thing. Visiting the entire city on an old, rusty, noisy bike just made the whole experience even more memorable.

In my last night in Bangkok, Kate and I returned to our favorite bar on Khaosan Road. This time, the Mexican Alejandro joined us. I ended up meeting with Juan again and Kate kissed the Mexican.

Through the window of the Grab, the Uber equivalent of Southeast Asia, I watched the sun light up like a blowtorch over Bangkok as I drove to the airport. Kate, who also got a volunteering job at the same hostel as me, was with me in the car.

I can't deny I was happy to leave the city. Two weeks in that damp haze filled with vibrant chaos was more than enough to exhaust me.

Although tired, I felt an unutterable gratitude.

I saw and lived so many unforgettable things in Bangkok that I

couldn’t stop thanking it for breaking the fear of the unknown Asia. Also, the pleasant anxiety about going to the Full Moon Party Island was an important personal milestone. I could hardly wait for all the experiences I was about to have in Koh Phangan.

80 – THE CYCLES OF THE MOON

Although we chose to travel by plane, the journey to Koh Phangan's island in the Gulf of Thailand was much longer than we expected. Waiting for two hours at the airport, two hours of flight, another two hours waiting for the ferry at Surat Thani port, and a 3:30 sea journey. Adding the commute time between all these places, we arrived at the hostel, where we'd work for the next few weeks, in the end of the afternoon.

Despite the tiredness, the atmosphere of the island already made me feel more relaxed. Every time I got a place on the coast, I knew deep in my soul I was born to live by the sea.

Steve, the American who owns the hostel, was not in Koh Phangan yet. A Thai of his trust brought me the keys to one of the wings, but it was impossible to spend the night there. I sent Steve a message that there was no water, no electric light, and the sheets on the beds were in a pitiful state of dirt. I didn't mention the garbage that was scattered everywhere, because that was something we could even have fixed.

We spent the next two nights at Steve's friend hostel until his arrival. We got an air-conditioned room with clean bedding, bath towels, and a private bathroom.

Koh Phangan's economy follows the phases of the moon. Every month, during the full moon week, the island welcomes thousands of tourists looking for fun in the psychedelic nights out that take place everywhere. The main party is the Full Moon, which takes place on Haad Rin beach. Two nights earlier, there's the Waterfall Party, somewhere well structured and surrounded by many trees. A day earlier, it's Jungle Party night, also in the middle of the forest. The night after the Full Moon, Jungle Party and Waterfall Party repeat. Two weeks later, there's the Half Moon Festival, repeating electronic music programming and neon-painted bodies. During the waxing and waning moons, the island is completely empty and silent.

We relaxed from the exhausting trip the first night and enjoyed the following day on the emerald green beach with white sand, located less than 500 meters from the hostel. It was Half Moon Week, and Kate had already arranged to meet a guy from Tinder at a pre-party at a hostel in the center of the island.

I'm not a big fan of electronic music, as I mentioned in Ibiza, but I also said that I was willing to allow myself to try new things on this trip. I danced all night, I lost Kate somewhere, before we even made it to the main dancing floor, and I ended up enjoying the party with a German with an athletic body and we saw the sunrise laughing on the

beach. I wasn't even worried that in a few hours I'd have a lot of work to do.

81 – A LOT OF WORK AND A HOSTEL FULL OF MICE

Steve was a well-built, funny and talkative guy with a Californian accent. I avoided starting any conversation with him when I was alone, as he always had a long and informational story to add. I just couldn't understand everything he said and I didn't like to ask him to repeat every sentence, because he was always giving too much information at the same time. My motto in any dialogue with him was: keep smiling.

He arrived at mid-afternoon, with Henry, a 19-year-old American who was also volunteering. Hours later, three cyclists arrived to join the team: Sofia from France, her boyfriend Raphael from Portugal, and Neil from South Africa. They met in Cambodia and cycled together to Thailand.

At the same night, we cleaned up the outside of the hostel completely, and we also cleaned the rooms next to the bar. As we gathered a few black bags with bedding from the hallway to laundry, a black mouse ran down the faded light blue tiles into one of the booths. A shiver ran down my bare feet up my spine to the nape of my neck. I can't explain what distressed me the most: whether it was the possibility that the rat had passed my feet at that moment, or if it was knowing that we'd be sleeping there that night.

- Please, tell me someone will get this mouse out of here – I begged.

- Even if they do, do you think it's the only one?- Sofia asked sarcastically.

It was pouring raining as we painted the bar stools with pink spray paint. That same night, we still spread a bunch of wet sheets and towels, we cleaned debris from the front of the bar, and we washed five bathrooms. The place seemed uninhabited for weeks and Steve listed a series of repairs he expected to be made for the upcoming holiday season within 10 days.

He showed how the reservation system worked, which was too complex for me, and he took us to three different buildings, with rooms under the management of Superpink Hostel.

- I need you all to pay close attention to the booking site. In Full Moon week, the movement is really crazy and I need everyone to know how it works. To avoid overbookings or any unpaid guest – Steve demanded.

After a cold shower, I got a bed in the booth pavilion above the bar. I had no guarantee there wouldn't be any rats there, but at least

I've seen none. Besides, I was so exhausted after so much work, after a night of partying and a day at the beach, that I couldn't think of any mice for too long.

82 – LOST IN THE CRAZIEST PARTIES

Paula, we meet at this very same place at 2am, ok? Have fun. – Henry hugged me before following two very sexy young women he had met at the bar that very same night. He was drunk and stoned, and I loved how funny he was at those times.

Fabiola, the Brazilian whose purse kept the 1,000 baht I had brought to the party, disappeared while I was talking to Henry, and I ended up following the group with whom we shared the taxi truck, a pickup truck with a truck body with seats used as transport of passengers almost everywhere in Thailand.

It was Jungle Party night. Kate had given up work and Neil was gone. Henry, Sofia, Rapha, and I had a work and party schedule. Henry and I had that night off. That means we didn't have to take care of cleaning the bathrooms before leaving and we could sleep later the next day. Rapha and Sofia had enjoyed the same benefit the night before when they went to the Waterfall Party.

- If you can't find your friend, you can ask me for money. Don't worry – a Canadian with round black acrylic glasses handed me a drink token. – Enjoy.

When we reached the dance floor in the woods, a killer Asian woman was swinging chains with fireballs on the stage. The place was packed and the music was deafening. I stopped to make sure the guy in patterned shirt, a few feet from us, wasn't the American I had been flirting with in the bar earlier. In a matter of seconds, the taxi friends disappeared, and I was alone again.

- You are lost. Give it up – Someone was having a good time next to me as I raised my heels and looked around for the Canadian with glasses. – Come here, you won't find them anymore. It's impossible.

- I have to find them. I have no money with me – I said, searching for the voice in the psychedelic lights.

- My name is João and yours? I immediately recognized the accent in the pronunciation.

- João? I asked, accentuating the tilde. – I'm Paula, Brazilian too.

I didn't dare go out to meet Henry at 2am. I was tired of losing myself from people, and I confess that João's kisses were much hotter than the kisses from the German who became my occasional sweetheart outside of party time.

I arrived at the hostel at 10am the next day, with wet hair.

- Are you coming from the party now? – Steve asked.

- Of course not. Now I'm coming from João's resort, -I said, waiting for the laughter.

- Smart girl. Better than the air-conditioned room, isn't it? – Sofia

shouted.

- What could I do? He was handsome and told me he had a jacuzzi! – I shrugged.

83 – THE BIGGEST PARTY LASTED A FEW SECONDS

I spent all afternoon serving beers and little buckets of vodka or whiskey with energy drinks to the tourists. As I cleared the tables, emptied the ashtrays, and gathered the empty bottles and buckets, I stopped to kiss Mike, my little German boyfriend.

Daan, a Dutchman who carries a stuffed monkey everywhere, he'd have a naughty look every time I sat next to Mike. I didn't know where he was staying, but every day he'd stop his rented scooter in front of the bar and ask me if it was the day of our kiss. I always laughed and said no.

Although he was very handsome, there was something about him that didn't appeal to me. He looked at me with such longing that it made me a little embarrassed. Mike could see that, since Daan didn't care to disguise it. I pretended nothing was happening, and of course, I had a lot of fun with the situation.

When I came back from the shower, ready for Full Moon Party, an American smiled with his gray blue eyes and stole my attention. The bar was packed and Mike left completely drunk without saying goodbye.

I picked up the box of fluorescent inks, and before I began handing out psychedelic brushstrokes among the clients, I drew an orange flower on the side of my forehead and repeated the pattern all over my left arm. The top two buttons of my printed shirt were open and showed my glittery lap. Nothing on my feet and the same everyday ripped denim shorts completed my outfit for the long-awaited Full Moon Party.

Dave, the American, was shirtless and asked for my help with his painting. As I made multi-colour dots and lines on his face, I noticed that he was staring into my eyes.

- You have a delicious smell. – he said with a teasing tone that warmed the back of my neck, making me blush.

While he was asking a series of casual questions, Deedee, a Thai man who was preparing the buckets in the outer bar, placed an energetic vodka bucket next to the paint box.

- I didn't ask for that, Deedee, – I said, trying to give him the drink back.

- You deserve it. You've worked hard. Take it. He said, smiling graciously with his oriental accent.

Flavia, my friend during the Bangkok school volunteer, had come back from Vietnam and met me at the bar to enjoy the party together.

When we got to the beach, we crossed the gate that surrounded the whole area, and I spent a few minutes looking everywhere.

- So, is this the famous Full Moon Party? No stage? No DJ? Nothing special? Just the same old bars fighting over the volume of music and a crowd in colorful clothes walking drunk on the sand.

It was different from what I expected, but I was there, and I tried to enjoy it to the fullest. It was as if another dream were crossed off my mental bucket list, and I wanted to celebrate.

The last thing I remember was exchanging contacts with a stunning Israeli after diving into the sea, dancing trance music only in pink lingerie.

84 – THE WALLET MYSTERY

I woke up in the hot and dirty makeshift room with the same clothes I wore to go to the party. I slept over the things I had left scattered on the mattress in the previous afternoon. I took a cold shower, got into the first dress I found in my backpack and ran to the bar to find out what had happened.

Steve said good morning and asked if I was ok.

- I hope so, – I said – I don't remember exactly how I got into my room, but I'm glad I woke up there despite the hellish heat.

- You were drunk, I'm sure you didn't even feel the heat. – He laughed.

It was after 2 pm, and I needed something to eat urgently. The last solid thing my stomach saw was a grilled ham and cheese sandwich from the convenience store in the middle of the previous afternoon.

- Steve, I'm sure I left my wallet here at the bar. Did you keep it somewhere? – I asked, organizing the dirty plastic buckets and throwing the shot glasses scattered on the counter in the sink.

- Yes, a green wallet, right? It should still be there, – he answered without worrying.

I turned the bar upside down twice before returning to the room. I couldn't find my wallet anywhere. When I returned, I washed all the dishes and arranged every inch behind the counter, being careful with the compartments next to the cash register. My hands were already shaking, and to make matters worse I remembered nothing after talking to the Israeli at dawn.

I texted Flavia to try to recall my steps the night before.

- You were funny, friend. Dancing out of control, but I left you at the bar safe and sound. You fell into the arms of a young blond boy and assured me that you knew him and that you were fine.

I figured the young blond boy was Mike, and I sent him a message to make sure.

- Did we meet late at night, after the party?

- Good morning, princess. Yes. Don't you remember? – he asked with several laughing emojis.

- And, you didn't take the chance to drag me to your hotel? I asked in an attempt to find out two things: if I had been in another room before the hostel, and if we had finally slept together, and I didn't remember.

- Of course not. I would never do that. I took you to the door of the hostel and we said goodbye – Mike answered causing me relief and admiration at the same time.

- You are so sweet. Thank you – I sent a kiss with a heart – I can't find my wallet. Did you see if I had anything in my hands when you left me in the room?

- No, gorgeous. You had nothing in your hands.

By then, I was so desperate that I didn't know if the dizziness I felt was from hangover, hunger or nervousness. My two credit cards and all my money were in my wallet, and I couldn't think of a reasonable solution. Only my passport, which was in a special pocket of the backpack, had been saved. I texted the staff group, and everyone made sure they had seen the wallet under the bar counter.

After 2 hours of searching, I accepted that I had lost it.

The worst was reliving the night before and not understanding how I could lose consciousness with a single bucket of vodka and energy drink. It was then that Deedee appeared smiling in my mind. Except this wasn't a memory of last night, it was the smile he gave me two nights ago when he tried to force me to accept a handful of weed. And, also on the night of the Jungle Party, when he insisted that I took a pill of Ecstasy. I turned down both offers, but I couldn't help thinking that he might have put something in the bucket he offered me so kindly while I painted the guests for Full Moon.

All the Thais I've met so far had been very kind and honest, I didn't want to believe that Deedee could do something like that. And, with what intention? I was afraid to comment on my distrust to Steve, but it was really weird that I lost control with just one little bucket. I could only thank Flavia for being by my side and Mike for being so considerate.

I sat on the pink armchair of the bar and leaned my head, which by this time weighed a ton, on my two hands, feeling tears of guilt, doubt and fear beginning to well up. But, before surrendering to the whirlwind of emotions, a voice inside me urged me to keep calm.

There was no use in despairing now. Let's start thinking of a solution. Let's go in stages. What's the most urgent action? – I was overwhelmed by a sense of capability. That was the first major problem to be faced during my trip. There should be a way out and I'd find it. After all, that would be just a good story to tell later.

When I had just blocked my German credit card and managed to convince the clerk to send me a new one to an island in the middle of Thailand, Kate appeared at the bar with her face scrunched from sleep and holding a green leather object in her hands.

- God damn it !!!!! I shouted as I got my wallet. "I spent the whole afternoon in despair, Kate!" Where was it?

- The bar was very crowded yesterday, so I got worried and took it to my room – she replied in the deep voice of someone who seemed to have smoked ten cigarette packs the night before.

It didn't feel right to complain. She took better care of my wallet than myself. I thanked and moaned at the same time. I tried to reverse the cancellation of the card, but there was no other way out. Now, I have to stay in Koh Phangan for another two weeks until I receive the new card.

"What can't be cured must be endured", I thought. At least I had money and my Brazilian card was safe. Also, Steve let me stay at the hostel as a volunteer, and since the island would be empty in less than two days, I'd have a private air-conditioned room while I waited. Everything was fine.

85 – FUN ROUTINE AND KEEN INTUITION

Steve was already in Koh Samui, where he had another hostel, with his Thai wife.

Sofia, Rapha Henry and I were in charge of the hostel and we led a lazy life, catching up with the laundry gradually after the insane Full Moon week. Sofia and I decided to clean up the kitchen and spent three days dodging hundreds of cockroaches and several mice while we washed up everything in the little room cluttered by drinks. The place was unrecognizable and I was proud of the work we've done.

After receiving the photos on the staff group, Steve was surprised.

- Are you serious cleaning up while I'm in Koh Samui? If I was a volunteer, I'd be completely wasted on this empty island.

We accepted the message as compliment and permission. So, we spent the rest of the days drinking and watching the sunset from the nearest beaches. We rented two motorcycles to explore faraway places and the regions with waterfalls, we got to know our neighbors from the Italian boutique and the tattoo parlor better, and we attended some smaller parties.

In the mornings, I'd wake up without an alarm clock to meditate in my room before going to the beach. Henry, who was by now my inseparable companion, would help me with the laundry, while Sofia and Rapha kept the bathrooms clean.

During that quiet time, I took advantage to fulfill Steve's request to draw a large image of Yemanja[19] in one of the bathrooms. He wanted to fill up the new art area, and he had asked me to do something.

I was surprised by my own talent. I copied the internet design by looking at it and created a style of my own in the hair and the ocean waves, which I made up under her feet by transferring my idea to the wall. I spent hours feeling neither hungry nor tired, free hand drawing with a black pen. When I decided it was done, I covered everything with varnish and posted a photo on the internet. I was proud of myself.

Henry and I had fun looking for new beaches and finding all the restaurants that sold pad thai for less than 50 baht on the island. It was amazing how a boy of only 19 had become so important. We smoked weed on the night of his farewell and, amidst laughter, we agreed to meet in the Atacama Desert.

I don't know if either of us really took it too seriously, but we spoke with great excitement under the light effect of the joint. I still

don’t like weed, but I felt safe to take a puff or two with my new, practically teenage friend.

Two days after Henry left, I had no idea how long it had been since my credit card order. For some reason, after meditating that morning, I didn’t go to the beach. I took a shower, bought a cup of coffee and a sandwich at the convenience store, and opened the bar before 10am.

Less than 20 minutes later, a motorcycle stopped near the curb.

- Paura Bruquimuri? – asked the skinny biker with a large envelope in his hands.

I couldn’t believe it. My credit card had arrived at the very same day I decided to open the bar in the morning to wait for the mail. I remembered what I read about meditation strengthening intuition and thanked it. Hours later, I had already bought my ticket to Krabi, which was on the other side of the continent.

86 – PHI PHI AND THE FREQUENCY OF THE UNIVERSE

I spent four days changing hostels in Krabi. I didn't know where to go. I was thinking of Vietnam, but it made me feel uneasy. I missed home, but I had nowhere to return after such a long time. My mother's house was not where I'd like to live, although I loved my mom unconditionally. The house I built with Felipe was no longer home. I wanted to go back to a place where I felt at home, but there wasn't such a place for me.

One afternoon, not knowing which day of the month or week I was, I saw a mindblowing sunset at Railay Beach, and I finally decided that I should go farther to the south of Thailand. The next morning I felt that the events taking place seemed like a warning from the universe: it's time to go.

The hostel had no reservations for the following night and the three British I've been sharing a room – Davae, Sakita, and Beth – with would leave for Koh Phi Phi. We became friends during a pub crawl and I found it a great idea to travel with them. Beth, a laughing, super-fun blonde, loved the idea of not being the only girl in the group anymore, and I felt welcomed. They were traveling alone. They met by chance on some island, and from then on they've been travelling together. I thought it was nice to have a gang, but I didn't stick with them for long.

When I arrived in Koh Phi Phi, I received a message on the internet.

- I arrive at Phi Phi today. What do you think about sharing a room with me for a while? I met a guy who can even get us a job.

Pamela and I started following each other on Instagram a few days ago because of a mutual friend who was in India.

I met her the same night at the hostel where we'd both live for the next few weeks. There, I met André, another Brazilian traveler who recommended us to the hotel manager and also introduced us to the owner of the bar where he was working.

- That's 400 baht per night with three free buckets. You don't have to do anything. Just stay there dancing until the party's over, – she explained.

The room would cost me 200 baht a day and I'd spend at most 100 baht with meals. And, to pay all of that I'd just need to drink for free and have fun at a seaside bar? It was hard to believe.

The next morning Pamela and I arrived at our new house with our backpacks

A small table between two single beds and a mirror on the wall. Clean sheets, bath towels, a fan in the corner and curtains on the windows. That was the best room I could have wished for. The bathroom was shared with three other rooms identical to ours, one of them taken by André and another Brazilian. In fact, in a few days, those four rooms would become a true Brazilian village.

Pamela, whom I nicknamed Girlfriend,was fun and very lively. She crossed the whole Thailand cycling and she decided to stop at Koh Phi Phi to rest and enjoy the holidays. The same night we were both employed, dancing reggaeton by the sea. Everything about the job was true. The bar owner hired a staff of 12 tourists from around the world every night just to cheer up the customers and keep the house busy all night long. I couldn't believe that sort of job existed. But it did. And I had attracted it to my life.

87 – A FAMILY OF TRAVELERS AND A VERY CRAZY CHRISTMAS

Almost every year, Felipe and I spent Christmas at my family's house in Curitiba. My mother dressed as Mrs. Claus, painting her eyebrows with a white pencil and put on a wool wig. My nephew believed wholeheartedly that this lady with a pillow in her belly was Santa's true wife. She'd go to our house to leave gifts every year, as her husband was too busy visiting other children.

In 2018, who would expect it, I would be on the other side of the world, on a paradise beach in Southeast Asia and my only family was a bunch of Brazilian travelers with no fixed addresses.

I bought a white belt and put it over the red dress I already had and went to work. It was funny being excited to work on Christmas Eve, but understandable. I'd get paid to drink and have fun in one of the best beach bars, while the vast majority of tourists there would spend money to do the same.

The next day, when my brother called me by video so that I could take part in the traditional Christmas dinner at my mother's house, I was in the hostel's pool, healing my Christmas hangover with plenty of water and painkillers. My time zone was 9 hours ahead of them.

- Where's Santa Claus, aunt? – My nephew Gabriel asked.

- He must be flying to Brazil, he drank a lot yesterday here in Thailand – I joked knowing that a 7 year old boy would certainly not understand the sarcasm in my words.

- Behave yourself, miss Paula, – my mother warned as my brother directed the camera to her face.

- Don't worry, mom. I can take care of myself.

The day after Christmas, we filled a rented long tail boat with beer and snacks and set off to see the most photographed set of islands in all Thailand, mainly because of Maya Bay, the setting for the movie "The Beach". We spent all day drinking and visiting the most amazing place I've ever seen.

After crying in the foggy mountains in Cappadocia, I figured it would be very difficult to be dazzled by nature again, but the Pi Leh lagoon surprised me even more. By the time our boat was circling the massive mountain range, I was already overwhelmed. As we entered that turquoise paradise surrounded by rocks, I was speechless. Inside me, I just wondered if all of that was real.

I walked through the delicate sand, feeling the water touch my waist. I wanted to photograph, but nothing could translate the beauty my eyes could see.

For some reason, I remembered Felipe and our last hug on the stairs at our old house. Tears and the excruciating pain no longer existed.

Those days in Phi Phi, with my heart empty of love, were among the happiest of my life.

- Thank you for setting me free – I whispered softly before diving into the turquoise sea.

88 – A SPECIAL NEW YEAR'S EVE

Argentina, Germany, Morocco, Brazil and the United States. I took a little tour of the different kisses in my days working at that crazy bar in Koh Phi Phi. It was fun being free to say goodbye without leaving my phone or a piece of my heart in those casual romances. Except that these shallow and unimportant relationships was starting to tire me.

Since giving up Laurent completely when I arrived in Bangkok, I had already decided that I didn't want to fall in love with anyone else until the end of the trip and my plan was going perfectly well.

Almost three weeks after my arrival in Koh Phi Phi, I got the first cold of the trip. Until then, the only time my immune system had failed was a nasal congestion in Portugal, certainly because of the cold baths in the Cascais Sea.

That flu in Thailand could even have been predicted. Every night we shared straws in the gin and vodka buckets, and all the travelers working at the bar had the same annoying cough.

A part of the Brazilians left Koh Phi Phi to celebrate New Year's Eve in Koh Phangan and I didn't go to the bar for a few days because of the fever, cough and different pains in every inch of my body.

When the last day of the year dawned, I packed my backpack and went out to ask for ferry prices and timetables for Phuket. When I returned to the hostel, determined to leave, Lully made a long explanation to convince me to stay. He said the parties in Phuket were not on the beach but inside the bars. He said that I would not have fun alone and that at least in Koh Phi Phi I was among Brazilian friends.

- Spend New Year's with us. Let's jump the waves together and hug each other. Tomorrow you go.

I decided to accept it, and instead of buying the one-way ticket, I bought a little white dress.

- I'm staying, but I won't get drunk. I don't wanna go to work, and I don't wanna kiss anyone – I said, denouncing that drinking, work fatigue, and petty flirtations were the cause of my agony.

A few minutes before midnight, Lully, Pamela, and I were in a charming oceanfront restaurant where I could see my place of work. I had a white flower in my hair and I was happy to be with my friends.

- 8 minutes left. C'mon C'mon! – Lully pulled me by the arm, taking the glass of gin from my hands.

- I think I'd rather stay here – I told her.

- No! The boys are at the bar. Let's wish Caio a happy New Year and thank the year by jumping the waves – Lully insisted – what's the fun of spending New Year's on a beach in Thailand and not stepping

on the sea?

She was right. I would certainly regret not giving thanks for the best year of my life while in connection with the sea, the place that made me the happiest.

A few fireworks lit the sky. The main religious practice in Thailand is Buddhism and their “Songkran”, the Thai New Year, is only celebrated in April. Therefore, Christmas and New Year’s parties were for Western tourists only.

Even so, a string with the number 2019 was lit with fire in front of the bar. The beach was crowded and the tide very low. I walked between the boats stranded on the sand until I could put my feet in the water and give thanks.

It was impossible not to remember last New Year’s Eve when I was still married and pretending to be drinking beer so our friends wouldn’t suspect I might be pregnant. How much had happened in just a year! I couldn’t believe how much my life has changed.

I looked up at the sky and could see a movie of tears and smiles everywhere I went. I lived so many special things when I finally accepted that Felipe shouldn’t be forced with me. When I realized that I had abandoned my career and my dreams so many times for him was my choice. So many experiences had come just because I accepted that life can change and that I can’t control people’s hearts, just as I couldn’t control the movement of the waves that wet my feet.

I didn’t feel entitled to make any requests, having experienced so many happy and painful things that year. I just gave thanks for absolutely everything. Every goodbye, every desire, every hug, every little experience that has taught me and changed me in some way.

I cried with gratitude and went back to the beach.

89 – FIRST KISS OF THE YEAR

It was exactly 29 minutes since we were in 2019. I was trying to take a selfie in front of the bar where I was supposed to be working that night. I wanted to make a joke on the Internet about spending New Year's Eve at work. When I positioned the phone, he was smiling behind the phone, looking at me in a way that nearly swallowed me. I refocused my eyes on the screen and he positioned himself beside me immediately.

- Hey, I didn't invite you to the picture. – I gently pushed him away with the back of the hand holding the phone.

- Come on, it's just a picture. – He raised my phone screen again. I found it funny and consented. Even in the camera image, his gaze was malicious. – Now send it to my WhatsApp.

- What's the number? – I asked mockingly.

- Now give me the first kiss of the year. – He tugged my arm after I sent the photograph.

- No way, darling. I don't wanna kiss anyone tonight.

- But the first kiss of the year is the most important one! – he argued, trying to hold me by the waist.

- And who says I want to give you the most important kiss of all? – I turned my face laughing.

- You are the most beautiful woman on this beach. I want my most important kiss to be with you – he insisted.

- I'm sorry. I have the flu and I don't want to infect you – I warned him, walking back.

- I don't care about getting the flu if I kiss you. – He pulled me again, this time with both hands on my waist. I got so close I could feel the strong wind swinging his burgundy shirt against my white dress.

Cristián was a tall Chilean, with shaved hair, thick eyebrows, and large honey-colored eyes. The well-designed mouth behind the close beard showed a broad and seductive smile. He was not strong, but he had a beautiful body and he smelled of a fresh shower.

He raised his big hands to the nape of my neck and conquered me. He kissed my mouth hard and longing but lost me within minutes of squeezing my body into his arms. I knew where he wanted to take that kiss. He wanted what all single travelers on Koh Phi Phi want: easy sex.

I took advantage of the confusion of tourists walking everywhere and disappeared into the crowd. For a few seconds, I regretted giving in to the kiss. Hadn't I learned this lesson from Luis in Greece? Still unable to keep a no when a man insisted on kissing me? Soon I left

self-condemnation aside to regain the energy of gratitude after praying by the sea. I had just finished the most amazing year of my life and nothing could get in the way of it.

The next day when I woke up. I laughed at Cristián's message.

- Where are you, princess? I am waiting for you at the beach.

I didn't answer and I didn't go to work that night either.

90 – THE REJECTION TRIGGER

An extratropical storm had already wreaked havoc in Vietnam and Cambodia and was approaching across the Gulf of Thailand. Our friends in Koh Phangan were hurrying to leave the island. The cyclone was expected to arrive in Phuket in the next three or four days and all vessels would soon be suspended.

Between meeting the storm in Phuket and staying in Koh Phi Phi, I decided to stay where it seemed safer. It had been four nights since I'd been in the bar, and until navigation was back to normal, I decided to go back to work. In addition, I got a second paid job as a guide on a tourist boat on the main islands of the archipelago and in a few days would recover the money I didn't make while I was in bed with a cold.

Before leaving for the bar that night, I got another message from Cristián:

- I didn't see you yesterday.

- I didn't go to work yesterday. I was recovering from the flu.

- Will I see you today? – he asked and was left unanswered.

I was already in the second bucket, dancing over the speakers when I saw him smiling and looking at me from the middle of the dance floor. I pretended not to see it and kept having fun. I was strangely happy to see him there looking for me, but I had already decided not to be with anyone until I left Koh Phi Phi. So I kept dancing on my own, at the top of the bar.

A few minutes later, he had his left arm around another girl's neck, saying something in her ear. Something in my brain immediately triggered a rush of adrenaline into my blood. It was her, the rejection. I felt exchanged for someone else and it consumed my chest. "What the hell is that now?" I asked myself. I could just ignore that since so far that Chilean meant nothing to me.

It was stronger than me. Slightly drunk, I waved until he noticed me and pointed my fingers between my eyes and his, smiling. He laughed releasing the girl and came towards me.

- Get down from there and kiss me. – Cristián smiled with open arms. I shook my index finger and pointed to the other girl. When I finally got down, he laid the same left arm on my shoulders repeating exactly the same scene I had just witnessed.

- I've been looking for you for three days, princess – he said, trying to kiss me.

- Go back to your other girl – I said, stepping under his arm and walking on the other direction.

After four days of virtually no drinking, the buckets quickly took effect that night. I don't remember exactly when I let him kiss me. At

2 am, when the music stopped, I grabbed my payday for the night and staggered out hugging him to the beach.

- Let's go to my *favela*[20] – he said in English, using the word *favela* in Portuguese.

- Let's go – I said with a kiss and a drunken smile.

91 – NOS QUEDAMOS LOCOS [21]

"Tell Cristián that the last boat leaves at 10am and I already bought the tickets." – It was 9:40 am and the message from Diogo, his brother, tore the floor under the single bed in my room. That would be the last ferry from Koh Phi Phi before the oncoming cyclone. He was going to Vietnam the next day on a flight leaving Bangkok.

Pamela had not slept in the bedroom and we made love all night long. I can remember the temperature of his hands caressing my belly as he insanely kissed my belly button. My silver bracelet dangled from the iron headboard of the bed making a soft bell sound. Outside I could hear the pool waterfall and the birds chirping as they drifted from tree to tree at dawn.

- Fuck it, I'll be with you one more day here at Koh Phi Phi, – Cristián said, looking deep into my eyes, before another hungry kiss.

- Boats will probably stop for the next two days because of the storm – I said as I reached for my cell phone under my pillow to check the calendar and think of a solution for us. I wish I had never reached the device. His brother's message ruined our plans.

- Come with me to Vietnam! – he asked me as he dressed quickly.

- I don't have a visa or a plane ticket. I don't even have time to organize my things and pay for the room now – I said.

- I want to see you again – he told me after a long, intense kiss by the pool.

- Me too – I said wrapped in the beach towel, not worrying about the guests who were already sunbathing in the pool.

When Cristián disappeared, my heart seemed to shrink at a fast pace. I felt that it would disappear within my chest at any moment.

I stepped into the cold shower to shake off the anguish that suddenly flooded me. Three nights ago I was running away from him on the beach and now I couldn't breathe thinking I'd never see him again. The best thing about all this was having two jobs to occupy my head in the next few days. Working at the bar and on the boat, I guaranteed 900 Bahts a day. It was more money than I needed and it would keep me very active.

I spent the afternoon cleaning ashtrays, collecting empty glasses and cans and helping tourists with diving masks, life jackets, stand up paddleboards and kayaks. The next day the tour would be suspended.

The work on the boat was the best I could have found. I loved talking about the Viking Cave and surprise the tourists with the real information about the place. Most think the place is protected by a rare Southeast Asian bird whose stools are worth a lot of money. In fact, it is not the feces, but the nest of swiftlets, made of solidified

saliva, which is one of the most expensive dishes in the world. A kilo of this delicacy can cost more than $2.5 in the United States and Europe.

When I returned from the bar the next morning, Cristián was already in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and sent me a romantic reggaeton. I listened more than five times before going to bed. “Qué más pues. Sigo aquí pensando en que rico fue, en que rico fue.”[22] The message spoke of the noise of the bed crashing against the wall and the words I said in his ear. He had discovered the map to drive me completely insane: He chose a song to make me relive our burning nights at Phi Phi.

- I got crazy for you, I keep thinking about the times we made love – he said.

- I will apply for my visa to Vietnam. Talk to you tomorrow – I said before falling asleep, listening once again to my new favorite song.

92 – PORN STAR

His bedroom was completely dark when we entered. The floor was as cold as the air conditioner eased the pain in his feet after a night of dancing. Guided by his hands on my hip, I climbed to the top bed of what I thought was a bunk bed. We tried to speak quietly, but I couldn't control the laughter. I was about to have sex in a shared room. Good thing it was dark and no one could see us.

When I woke up the next day, I couldn't find my cell phone or my money, much less my panties. I laughed at myself. With the light streaming through the cracks in the curtains, it was possible to see more than 20 bunk beds.

We had a fruit shake together and Cristián seemed completely different from the seductive guy on New Year's Eve. He had an innocent smile and looked at me curiously now.

- How old are you? – I asked, already wondering if I would name another younger man on my list of flags.

- 27 and you?

- Guess – I didn't want to tell him that I was ten years older and was traveling the world and having sex in shared rooms, like a 20-year-old girl.

- 25?

- Thank you, but it's far from it. Put another 12 years there – I revealed, placing my self-judgment in the fuck-it mental box.

- No way! What is the secret? – he asked, amazed.

- Be happy.

* * *

That same night, Cristián arrived at the bar with a wide smile. After kissing me, he closed his eyes and threw his head back smiling.

- Hey, you won't believe what I have for you! – He picked up the phone and opened a black and white photo.

- What is it? – I was trying to understand the image of a security camera when he put his finger on one of the beds.

- We had some paparazzi yesterday. There was a camera in my dorm! – he laughed. – But don't worry, it's impossible to identify us.

- Holy shit! That should be illegal! – I snapped, my other hand over my mouth trying to control my concern. – Did they give you the video?

- No. They just let me take this picture to show you. – He picked up the phone and pulled me against his chest. – Don't worry, I swear

they can't tell who's having fun.

I could only laugh at the situation.

That night we walked around the island laughing after we smoked my friends' joint in the sand of the beach.

- Someone tells my mother that I have succeeded in life. Now I'm a porn star in Thailand – I paraded with open arms as he applauded me. We stopped every three steps to kiss and laugh at the love story we could tell our children in the future.

- What a beautiful story for a first date! The most beautiful of all – he cheered as I writhed in my stomach with so much laughter.

That night he went to my *favela*.

93 – A BEAUTIFUL FOLLY OF LOVE

The train stopped at Huê station at 7am, but I had no internet to confirm my suspicions. I had been traveling for almost two days and the plan was to meet Cristián in the late afternoon in Hói An, the next city on the train route. I had a hunch and asked the friendly Vietnamese who shared the cabin with me to share the data service package from her cell phone.

- My train has stopped in Huê. Can I get down here? – I sent the message, praying that he would respond in time.

- I just got here. Where are you? – he said, and I didn't even stop to reason it, I grabbed my backpack and jumped off the train, which closed the door immediately behind me. When I found myself without the internet again I wondered if "here" he meant in Huê or Hói An.

I found a guesthouse outside the station and asked them to use the wifi. This time I called to be sure of my next steps. We were less than two kilometers away and I just wondered how my intuition was getting sharper.

Cristián had just got off a night bus and was with his brother and a friend, taking three motorcycles.

I paid for a shower at the inn, had a black coffee, and waited for my ride outside. Sitting on the train station steps with my backpacks, I was bursting with happiness and had time to make a very rational conversation with myself before the blue and white scooter pulled up in front of me.

- Paula, you are here because you chose to be. Even though Cristián showed enthusiasm, you came because you wanted to come. It may be that things don't go as you expect. It may be that over the days he's not this nice guy you painted in just three nights. He may not like you. You may not like him. A thousand things can happen and yet it will be alright. You will never blame him if he doesn't correspond to your feelings because it was you who chose to travel to another country to be with a guy you don't really know.

When I finished my internal dialogue, I spotted three motorcycles coming out of the chaotic traffic of the main street towards me. He flashed a huge smile while Diogo, his younger brother, joked about our meeting. Pablo, their friend who traveled with them, just watched everything laughing.

Diogo took my bigger backpack and I climbed Cristián's motorcycle, who squeezed my right thigh tightly.

- I'm so happy to have you here!

I just hugged his body from behind, tightly. There was no word in Portuguese that could express how I felt. In English, much less.

When we finally got into the insane traffic in Vietnam, my heart sped up in a way that had never happened before. Cristian dodged cars and motorbikes, no one respected traffic lights, and people walked among cars wearing their face masks, without looking sideways. For a minute, I thought that if I hadn't put my life at risk until then, the time had come.

- Canceled, canceled, canceled! – I shouted to the wind, waving my right hand behind the back of my neck, not caring what Cristián would think.

We parked the motorcycles in front of the Citadel, also known as the Imperial City, and I wondered who was the Chilean I was going to spend the next few days with.

- I worked in sales in Chile and spent the last year studying English in Auckland, New Zealand. Now I am traveling a little, before returning to Chile and looking for a new job – Cristián explained, mentioning also his degree that I could not understand.

- I was a journalist and married for 14 years. Now I'm traveling the world since I got divorced. Nice to meet you. – I put out my right hand. He laughed and said once again that he was happy to see me again.

When we reached our second stop, an elephant sanctuary in the middle of a forest, we had fun avoiding piles of dung on the small road that led to the parking lot. We were unsure if the path indicated on the GPS was right, but judging by the size of the feces, we couldn't be wrong.

We paid something around a dollar to leave the motorcycles in the yard and walked on. The lady who greeted us spoke absolutely no English. Just nodded, pointing to the road. "Elephant, up. Up" she repeated, showing the river that cut the property on the map.

We head toward the water. The river went down fast and noisy among very large round stones, and this did not seem the best place for an elephant sanctuary. It was not a geographically friendly river for such large animals.

We met a group of tourists coming in the opposite direction and asked if the sanctuary was too far away.

- Keep climbing – one of them laughed, with a German accent – you need to see for yourself. His friends' laughter sounded strange, but since we were there, there wasn't much to do.

After ten minutes of walking between the rocks, the sound of the water became deafening and we finally found the big surprise: a concrete trunk handcrafted in a large elephant-shaped rock in the middle of the river.

- This cannot be it! – Cristián laughed as another group descended toward us.

- We are also disappointed. Such a sanctuary does not exist. Do not waste your time climbing, because the only elephant here is that rock over there – a middle-aged man informed us; he was wearing grey shorts and black socks that went to the middle of his calves. From the pronunciation of the Rs and Ls, he was probably American or Canadian.

Cristián asked Pablo to take a photograph of him between Diogo and me.

- Quiero mostrarle Paulina a mamá[23] – he said, excited. Every word he said entered my ears slowly creating a whirlwind of emotions that I refused to look up close. I knew I should be careful, but it did me so well that I let myself be carried by the calm waves of their conversation.

A journey of about 6 hours separated us from Hoi An, where we would spend the next two or three nights. The road was full of breathtaking scenery, but the dense forest that skirted the highway brought down the temperature in the late afternoon. Even so, we were all excited about the trip. I couldn't help myself, I was so excited. Visiting a country as peculiar as Vietnam on the back of a scooter feeling an adventurous passion? It definitely matched the kind of crazy adventure I'd like to live.

As the sky began to redden, we stopped at a gazebo overlooking the Vietnamese sea and made a beautiful photo of the four motorcyclists.

At night we arrived in Hoi An. We were tired and our faces dirty with the dust of the road. Still, the feeling of joy in my chest was overwhelming and nothing could take the smile off my face.

We had something Western for dinner, before going to the guest house where our luggage had already been delivered by the store where we rented the motorcycles.

Finally, we had a private room with a double bed. We made love to each other after a shower as if these were our last minutes on Earth. Everything was perfect and I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world that night.

94 – LUCKY MAN

Hói An is much more than charming. The city of lanterns, which has endured since the 16th century, is a valley of tranquility within the frenetic traffic scene of the rest of the country. The historic center, with its yellow buildings decorated with thousands of colorful lanterns, does not allow cars or motorcycles to travel, giving tourists a romantic atmosphere unseen in Southeast Asia.

I spent the day following the Chileans in tailoring shops. The place is famous for tailored suits at unimaginable prices, and they wanted new clothes for the upcoming wedding season among their friends.

In the chosen store, I could see better how Cristián likes to seduce women. He had fun hitting on the extremely shy Vietnamese saleswomen. I watched with an analytical look and an incredulous smile on my face. I was increasingly sure that he was the perfect scoundrel. But he was a deliciously seductive bastard.

- Does your girlfriend let you look at women like that? – Xuan, our saleswoman, asked.

- She's not my girlfriend. She is my wife and she is not jealous of me – he replied, giving a warm kiss on my mouth. – Isn't that true, hot babe? – The "wife" part surprised me, but I just smiled, rolling my eyes and unable to agree with him.

I helped them choose the colors of the suits and the prints for the internal finishing. After making all the sales woman fall in love with each one of them, Cristián pounced. With its annoying charm, it managed to negotiate an unbelievable price for all three sets. While he had fun pulling the calculator from Xuan's hands, Diogo approached me.

- This is heaven for Cristián. He buys things he doesn't need, just for the pleasure of bargaining. His prize is not the merchandise, but to get the price he wants – Diogo commented, proud to see his brother in action.

Cristián and I lived in a world without watches. Diogo and Pablo didn't wait for us. They simply followed their own plans and we contacted each other later to find out where they were. We made love without haste, whenever we were in our room. Four, five, six times a day.

- Why is it so perfect? – he asked me, panting after we had just came together.

- I don't know – I said, smiling, not really worrying about finding a logical explanation. – Do you think we can try once to make it feel bad?

- *Impossible* – he said in Spanish, between passionate kisses.

On our Last night at Hói An, we walked through a night market full of trinkets, handicrafts, and exotic food. Whole roasted ducks, with heads, beaks, and fins, were sold hanging from clotheslines, and some stalls displayed snakes, frogs, and other animals grilled on sticks.

When I stopped to look at some palm-straw boxes, the salesman from the tent next door showed Cristián a tray full of rings.

- Beautiful girl. Beautiful. Girlfriend? – he asked, smiling and pointing at the costume jewelry.

- Wife – Cristián replied, hiding his mouth with the back of his hand and paying attention to my expression.

- Uhhh Lucky man! – The Vietnamese replied, almost whispering, but celebrating with a radiant excitement.

Cristian laughed with satisfaction and spent the rest of the trip repeating the salesman's expression with the same intonation each time he saw me getting out of the shower or putting on makeup. I was shy, but I loved his effort to make me believe he thought he was the luckiest guy on the planet.

95 – THE NIGHT THAT NEVER EXISTED

In Ho Chi Minh, the ancient Saigon, in the far south of Vietnam, we were caught in a thick, freezing rain as we left the public market. We spent a heavy afternoon visiting the Vietnam War Memorial Museum and I cried a few times seeing pictures of children and old people in distress. I left there with a headache and decided to look for more moderate programs to end the day.

I had lost eight pairs of flip flops in Thailand and was wearing Diogo's flip flops, which were bizarrely large for my feet. I was so happy that I didn't mind walking for days with shoes six numbers bigger than mine. I thought it was funny. But that afternoon I decided to buy new sandals. After the shoe stall, we stopped in a square where dozens of men and women played some kind of soccer with shuttlecocks.

I had never seen any similar sport, but it seemed to be the Vietnamese national passion. Apparently there were two different ways to play. Within a court, with a volleyball net in the middle, or in a circle, just as Brazilians play with a soccer ball.

The Chileans were quickly accepted into a circle and had fun learning the moves with a Vietnamese who claimed to be the coach of that sport, which I could never figure out the name. After the game, we strolled the public market and I saw Cristián try to bargain from eco-leather wallets to cheap fake sports shoes.

We entered a food market to escape the rain when the sun was setting, and we ended up getting excited about the beers. A live music show cheered up the place and, at some point in the night, the beer glasses were replaced with a bottle of rum.

Diogo and I were singing excitedly when I noticed the second bottle on the table. The next minute, I was waking up with Cristian kissing me voraciously, not caring about the hangover breath that morning brought me.

It was our last 24 hours together and we spent the day drinking lots of water and trying to figure out what had happened the night before. Cristián was the only one who remembered everything. The big problem is that we separated from Pablo and Diogo after smoking pot around the city and neither one of them could tell where they were until they found the hotel address at daybreak.

Diogo said he was seduced by two Vietnamese who took off their clothes and asked for 1 million dongs for sex, which was less than $50. He was grateful for not having the money, otherwise he would have paid it, he said.

Pablo, on the other hand, lost his cell phone, credit card and gave

a 50 euros bill to a homeless person. No one understood the reason. “I think I was very happy,” he argued.

- Good thing you took care of me. If I wasn’t with you, I would certainly have a bizarre story to tell. – I hugged Cristian, feeling grateful.

- I wouldn’t say that. – He laughed looking at Diogo and Pablo.

- I did something wrong? – I asked, searching my mind for flashes from the night before.

- You kissed a Ukrainian on the mouth. And right in front of her husband, – he revealed, and everyone laughed.

- Goddammit! Really??? – I asked incredulously.

- Yes – Diogo added – You wanted me to kiss her, but I said I wouldn’t do it because her husband was next door. So you went there yourself and kissed her.

- Don’t worry – Cristián added – he didn’t care.

I didn’t feel embarrassed. I found it funny and had fun with my audacity. Kissing a woman in such a traditionalistic country, religiously speaking, and still in front of her husband? I had certainly lost my mind when I boarded to Vietnam after a boy ten years younger than me.

96 – GOODBYE TEARS

"I'm here without the strength to get out of bed while I hear your cheerful voice singing a sensual reggaeton. I'm trying to protect my heart from this storm that has collapsed every time you looked at me with such sweetness and fury at the same time. I was whole when you convinced me to give you that first kiss of 2019. I had my bags ready to leave that morning. I had a plan. I was giving my feelings a break because they always make a lot of mess. And now I'm here, trying to pick up the pieces that we scattered on the floor of Vietnam. I'm leaving, but I am leaving with you attached to me. "

I wrote on my cell phone notepad as I listened to the shower marking the rhythm of the song Cristián hummed. I translated it into Spanish and sent it to his cell phone before turning off the bedroom light. My backpacks were ready in the armchair under the window. On the round wooden table, my sunglasses he broke on the night of our boozing at the market and a japamala with a green buddha image that I was leaving as a gift.

That early morning, Cristian made dozens of selfies with me, just as he always did when we were in bed talking about anything and laughing at absolutely everything. After we last loved each other, I let the tears stream from my eyes in silence, protected by the darkness of the room. I made a tremendous effort to keep my breathing natural and not move my body, but I couldn't hide my tears for long.

We were awake and I could feel in the air that there were a thousand thoughts and words bubbling between us, but we didn't know what to say. Cristian searched my cheek for a kiss, perhaps trying to give me some comfort. He didn't know I was crying, but the pain of another goodbye was choking us both in that bed. It was like having an anvil pressing on our bodies.

- Are you crying, Paulinha? – he asked softly.

- Just a little. Don't worry – I said, whispering not to denounce my nose completely jammed with the contained tears.

- Why, my princess? – He wiped my tears with his hand and realized I was lying. Even my hair was already wet.

I was silent, pinching my lips and my eyes, and trying to hold my breath to keep from sobbing.

I turned to the opposite side and when I felt the crying was under control, I went to the bathroom. I turned on the shower and released that contained energy from my body. Naked in front of the mirror, as the water slid down my back soothing my chest, I just thanked myself for allowing me to live this crazy adventure.

I didn't sleep until my cell phone alarm went off at 5:30 in the

morning.

- I'll be waiting for you in Chile, with my arms wide open, my hot babe – he hugged me after I put the backpack on my back. – Diogo, come comfort me. Paulinha is leaving me! – he shouted, turning his head to the door that was already open.

I was torn to pieces. I was always the one who watched the other turn and leave. When I said good-bye to Laurent in Greece, I thought it would be easier to leave before him, but I found that it was not abandonment that hurt me, it was separation.

At the airport, while writing a poem full of metaphors on my Instagram, I remembered once again that it was exactly a year since Felipe and I had been apart. Certainly, my subconscious was enhancing that pain, since I knew that Cristián was just a seductive man with whom I had an adventure.

When Laurent and I stopped talking in Turkey, it was a few days before the anniversary of my father's death, which was also a painful separation. If our emotions, together with our thoughts, create our reality, I was trying to understand how unconscious emotions can be interfering all the time with the outcomes of our choices.

That was too much to rationalize. I closed my eyes inside the plane and only woke up when I landed in Bangkok.

- Thank you so much for everything, my Paulinha. It was the most beautiful folly of love you could have done. Enjoy the rest of your trip, as you know how to do. If you really go to Chile, I'll be waiting with open arms. I send you a kiss and an infinite hug.

Cristián's message bothered me. When I sent my message hours earlier, while he was in the shower, I raised the expectation that he would respond with the same intensity as me. But that was my fault, and I couldn't even complain.

97 – Stuck in a Village Called Pai

The mountains of northern Thailand were as amazing as their paradisiacal beaches. Despite my suffocating longing for Cristián, I was glad to be back. Chiang Mai was charming, cheap and full of temples as impressive as those of Bangkok. I stayed only two nights and went to Pai, which won me right away.

After the sickening 762 curves between Chiang Mai and Pai, I got off the van in the middle of the street market. Dozens of stalls with crafts, clothes and delicious sweet and savory foods. Pai has something of a hippie village that fascinates backpackers. The bed I booked cost less than $15 a night and a fairly tidy restaurant by Thai standards sold pad thai at 30 baht. In addition, several bars were hiring staff.

It would be a great place to spend a few weeks, but Juliana and I had plans to board the boat for Laos soon. It would be a three-day trip across the Mekong River, one of the largest in the world, and it was great to meet a friend who was willing to live that adventure with me.

I hadn't spoken to Cristian since I landed in Bangkok. After two nights of touring all the charming little bars with exceptional Thai bands, Ju and I were ready to leave the next day, but my German credit card, yes, the same one I thought I lost in Koh Phangan, was gone.

From then on, Juliana and I began to go through an endless saga trying to leave Pai's village. Ironically, I discovered a few days later that Pai in Thai means "to go." It sounded like a bad joke.

98 – THE FALL ON THE SCOOTER

Everything in my bag was intact. The wallet, Thai and Vietnamese money, documents and my credit card from Brazil. I looked around my backpacks more than three times just to be sure I hadn't lost anything. Believing I would find the card in one of the bars, I asked Juliana to stay one more night. I didn't know how I would do it this time to apply for another card without being sure of my whereabouts within the next two weeks.

The next day I canceled the card and requested a new one for the address of a hostel in Bangkok. Returning to Thailand was not in my plans, but the German bank did not agree to send the card to any other country. I sent an email to the hostel in Bangkok stating the approximate delivery date of the card and told Juliana I was ready to go. This time, she asked us to postpone the trip because she had met a beautiful Frenchman the night before.

I went out one more night to have fun with my new group of friends. I met Lila and Barcelona, a Brazilian and a Spanish again. We had worked together at the beach bar in Koh Phi Phi. A Chilean and an Argentinian joined us.

In the morning Juliana told me that she got stood up by the French and we decided to leave the next day. We rented a motorcycle to brave Pai's surroundings together on our last day. I didn't know how to drive and Juliana was a little insecure, but we still faced the challenge.

Less than 15 minutes after leaving the motorcycle shop, while we were on our way to the gas station, Juliana was confused about driving on the left side of the road when we entered a busy avenue, throwing the scooter to the right as to avoid crashing into a car that came in our direction.

As the motorcycle began to lie to the left, I accepted that the fall was inevitable. I felt my left knee and arms scalping on the boulders and, with my eyes closed, just wished the motorcycle would stop crawling on the floor. We spent a few seconds asking each other if we were okay and reassuring each other that we were.

When we got up, we saw that our clothes were torn at the knees and two girls ran with hydrogen peroxide and gauze to help us. We fell right in front of an emergency medical clinic. My wounds burned, but Juliana's knee was noticeably worse than mine.

The motorcycle had been on the roadside with the key in the ignition. I pushed it closer to the clinic and discussed with Juliana what to do. Besides feeling a lot of pain, she was not feeling secure to ride the scooter back. We called the owner of the hostel where she

was working in exchange for accommodation. Juliana came back on the back of his motorcycle and me on his girlfriend's, who rode our rented scooters.

The next day, I went with a friend to return the scooter. Thanks to Buddha, no one noticed that it suffered a fall. But Juliana's wound required care and we delayed our boat adventure to Laos once again. We decided to stay in Pai three more nights.

99 – ONE OR TWO NIGHTS WILL MAKE NO DIFFERENCE. WILL IT?

It was very hot in Pai during the day, but the temperature dropped sharply with the sunset. Juliana's boss was very generous letting us stay in a small thatched bungalow on the banks of the Pai River for a few more nights without paying. It was a very simple cabin, with room only for the double mattress on the floor, with a mosquito netting attached to the ceiling. Juliana finally managed to find the Frenchman again, and I had to stay out of the cabin every night until later, since with her injured leg she couldn't wander around the village. But that was a problem I easily solved, drinking cheap beer while listening to the great bands in Pai's bars.

When we finally decided to set off on our adventure to Laos, I went through the city's dozens of travel agencies to buy our tickets. The plan was to board the next day, but there were no more seats available on the long boat that made the three-day journey. There were only seats left on the half-price bus, which took only one day, but it was nowhere near the trip we both wanted to make.

I texted Juliana and we decided that two more nights in Pai would make no difference. It was even comical. It had been a week since we repeated the same sentence to each other.

To make sure we were actually leaving Thailand this time, I left with purchased tickets and booked a taxi to pick us up at the hostel. The starting point wasn't far, but Juliana's leg was our priority.

100 – HEALING A DEATHLY WOUND

Felipe cried a lot as he put his uniforms in a gray suitcase. The furniture in our house was covered with yellow sheets and a bright light came through the balcony window where the fern had been waiting for water for several days. It was a long time since everything was abandoned inside that house which had been once the home of our dreams.

I wasn't feeling the same despair inside me as before. I just watched Felipe's pain and felt helpless that I couldn't take it from him. One day, he couldn't take away the pain that plagued me either.

Already inside the car, while a thin, colorless rain wet the windshield, he banged his hands on the steering wheel.

- I fucking love you! You don't believe me anymore, but I love you.

I watched him silently, wanting to comfort him, who was so important in my life. It was my opportunity to put it all behind us, forget everything, and start over. We have done this so many times before. But I no longer wanted to convince him to stay and that was weird.

I felt a deep emptiness take over my chest. When the car drove off, I wanted to turn back the clock and try to fix things, but it wasn't out of love, it was out of zeal. Suddenly, I saw my father with a coat in his hands saying goodbye. Someone held me as I begged him to carry me in his arms. I felt tears wetting my cheeks and shrill screams clawing in my throat. It was the first time I saw the pain in my father's eyes. I was terribly afraid of being abandoned forever and screamed at him not to leave me there.

The pain was so sharp that I woke up from that meaningless dream. Lost in time, I was just trying to figure out where I was. I looked up at the ceiling and saw the white veil covering the bed where I slept. Juliana breathed quietly beside me, but I was breathing harshly. Not to wake her, I concentrated on the noise of the river as I counted my sighs slowly.

- Those who leave also suffer.

That phrase rose up in my thoughts for no reason and I started to cry. I could no longer stay in the cabin. I grabbed one of the three comforters, which we smuggled from the dorms to protect us from the chill that easily penetrated the thatched walls, and sat on the hammock outside.

The sky was beginning to lighten on the horizon and I could hear only the cicadas and the gentle current of the river. I thought of the pain I felt leaving Andrew, Laurent, and Cristián, and finally, I could

understand the lesson that dream brought me.

I had to experience that journey of leaving things behind with frequency to put myself in Felipe's place and understand that those who leave also suffer, also cry. I realized that my father never left me, he just had to leave, not because he didn't love me, but because the marriage to my mother was no longer working and that was another relationship. He would always be my father.

Sometimes leaving is the only option for those who go and it doesn't mean that someone doesn't care about those who stay. It just means that some cycles need to be closed.

I closed my eyes and focused on Felipe's face. It was strange how his image was already blurry in my mind. I couldn't even see the iris of his green eyes that I used to love so much.

- I regret being so selfish thinking that only I was suffering. I recognize that it hurt for you too. I forgive you for leaving, Felipe.

When the sun came up waking the birds, I was thankful that I had the time I needed in Pai, and although the meaning in Thai is not the same,[24] the name of that village never made so much sense to me. It was in my father's eyes that I discovered my deadly wound.

101 – THE THEFT AND A CALM WHISPER

Juliana was still limping and the bandage on her knee was complex. I was willing to do anything to help her but help with the bandage. I definitely had no stomach for wounds.

The first part of the trip was in a van. We returned to Chiang Mai, facing the same 762 infernal curves, and stopped at Chiang Rai to see Wat Rong Khun, the famous and iconic White Temple, which was renovated by the architect Chalermchai Kositpipat and put the city on Thailand's tourist route.

We took our visa at the border and spent the night in a dirty and very simple guest house in Huay Xai, on the Lao side of the border. The van and the room were included in the travel ticket, so there wasn't much to complain about. I covered my side of the bed with my sarong and Juliana used her sleeping bag. It was clear that those sheets had not been changed for weeks. The next morning we finally got to see the boat where we would spend the next two days.

The trip is no luxury cruise, but it was just that kind of adventure I hoped to live. A wooden boat of about ten meters long, with several bus seats that were not attached to the ground, forming two rows. In the back, a kitchen where the sailor's family lived, a space with some mattresses and a bathroom used by all passengers. There was no flush, no toilet paper. As in many Southeast Asian toilets, the latrine was on the floor, and a drum stored water to be used in the toilet as well as hygiene. Good thing I always had cleaning wipes on me.

We spent all day sitting. The boat, which is the main means of transport for the local population, stopped in every village on the river bank and it was impossible to ignore the misery most people lived in. At each stop, dozens of children hung on the sides of the boat, asking for money or trying to sell fabric bracelets.

Near sunset, the boat stopped in Pak Beng city. Sitting between tourists and backpacks, Juliana and I arrived at the guest house in the back of a pickup truck. The poor bars and restaurants reminded me of some of the roadside towns in the Amazon that I saw on a car trip I took with Felipe in our first year of marriage.

The next morning I left Juliana at the inn with the big backpacks and walked to the harbor. I wanted to ensure a good seat for her leg on the boat. I left our two boarding packs guarding the first seats and got off the boat to buy a pack of cigarettes. I wasn't exactly in the mood to smoke, but I wanted cigarettes for the trip. When I got back from the stall, Juliana arrived in the truck and I ran to help her out

with the backpacks.

At the entrance to the boat, I kept my wallet in my hand, the cigarettes, and Juliana's backpack, which was tied to a cart. On the other hand I held the plastic bag where I should put my sneakers. Barefoot culture seemed even more important in Laos. As I tried to balance myself with the river swing, I took off my shoes and managed everything in my hands.

When I reached the middle of the boat, I stopped in the corridor and noticed that my wallet was no longer in my hand, and I remembered resting it on a bench next to the sailor's helm. I went to the end of the boat to leave the luggage, and when I returned to retrieve my wallet, I didn't find it anymore.

My heart raced and I felt my hands sweat. I asked all everyone who worked on the boat, but they didn't answer me at all. They just waved their hands as if to explain that they did not speak English. I tried to mime, but none of them paid attention to me.

I searched through my purse to make sure I hadn't stored the wallet without realizing it, but I had vividly in my mind the image of the green wallet, with the cigarette pack on it, standing on the varnished wooden counter just beside the helm.

I looked under the stools and even went back to the stall where I'd bought the cigarettes, even though I was sure I had left nothing there. Annoyed, I forced myself to sit in my seat and forced myself to accept that my wallet was gone forever. I didn't have the heart to say that, but theft was the only explanation for that.

I put both hands over my eyes and started to cry. Juliana put her hand on my shoulder and asked me to calm down.

I sobbed softly and wondered why this was happening to me once again. Then someone gently touched my back.

- Is your passport safe, miss? – The sweet voice of a gray-bearded gentleman entered my ears and calmed me. I took my hands off my face and turned to him. His blue eyes, outlined by the thin, wrinkled skin, were so close to mine that for a second everything around me disappeared.

- It's in my backpack – I replied, with a choked voice.

- So, it's all right – he now had his hand over my head. – You have your friend, and she will take care of you. The money and other documents you get back later. – He smiled, lighting a light of hope and gratitude in me.

102 – UNFORGETTABLE ADVENTURES

The boat trip ended in Luang Prabang, the country's capital until the communist occupation in 1975, where the king of the former Laotian kingdom was located. The country's main tourist destination, thanks to the Kuang Si waterfalls, the city is well-structured, with many hotels and guesthouses, well-appointed restaurants and a night market rich in local crafts and typical foods.

My first step was to contact the manager of my Brazilian credit card and request an emergency withdrawal and a new card, a headache that took seven days to resolve, thanks to my bank's poor service. I was very lucky to be with Juliana because she withdrew money from her own card, so I could pay her via online transfer.

We stayed for two days in Luang Prabang. In the first one, we walked on foot, visiting some temples and walking through the tree-lined streets full of shops. The next day, we toured the beautiful Kuang Si waterfalls, which vary in color from turquoise to emerald green because of the concentration of limestone and other minerals in the water. The place is full of tourists, but it was definitely worth the visit. I was blown away by the generosity of nature in this unique place.

In the evening we had a beer at Utopia Bar. A place on the banks of the beautifully decorated Mekong River and undoubtedly the main meeting place for backpackers passing through Laos.

The next afternoon we were already arriving at Vieng in a van. The city is much more rustic than Luang Prabang and enters the tourist trail thanks to the three blue lagoons and a water crawl pub that attracts younger travelers and drunkards. I was looking forward to this attraction.

On the third day in Vang Vieng, Juliana and I were being carried by the Nam Song River, sitting on buoys and stopping at various bars. The activity was as much fun as it was dangerous, so when we were "caught" by the first bar, I said quietly to myself, "Let's have fun without losing consciousness, Paula."

At the end of the day, I was wet and slightly drunk trying to warm myself up in a bonfire prepared exclusively for those who came out of the tubing. I could not feel happier to have lived another unforgettable experience.

Vientiane is the capital of Laos and that's where Juliana and I said goodbye to our adventure together with a new haircut. It was also there that I finally got my emergency card and withdrawal approved by my bank after six days of daily calling and a lot of patience on my part.

Juliana flew to Vietnam and I returned to Bangkok by bus.

103 – THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING SUNRISE

At 4:30 am I was already cycling through the dark streets of Siem Reap toward the Angkor temple complex in Cambodia. The cool dawn wind was like a balm of tranquility that anointed my body. I was proud and happy to have changed my plans and exchanged the Philippines for Cambodia.

I fell off my bike as I entered a bumpy street and injured the same knee that I had injured in the motorcycle accident in Pai, Thailand. It was so dark, I couldn't see the seriousness of my injury. I just sat on the saddle and kept cycling so as not to miss the sunrise.

After six miles of pedaling, I sat in front of the main temple and saw one of the most beautiful nature's shows of my life. A red fireball appeared on the horizon, revealing the ruins of that mystical and impressive place.

Angkor was once the world's largest capital and center of the Khmer Empire. The main temple, which gives its name to the whole complex, is considered the largest religious monument on the planet, and spiritual energy still pulses from the immense rock walls that holds centuries of history.

I was in Siem Reap only for a few days, I arrived by bus after I got my cards back in Thailand and there I met André and Renan, two Brazilians of the travelers family in Phi Phi.

I kept communicating with Cristián with videos, photos and text messages. I didn't like the need I had to talk to him every day. This emotional dependency was all I didn't want to live in a relationship, but he said he couldn't wait to see me again, and I rushed in and drew the end of my life's journey.

I bought a ticket from Cambodia to Auckland, New Zealand, and finally the stretch from New Zealand to Chile. I would finally cross the Pacific Ocean completing the world tour.

- *Novinho*, I bought my ticket to Chile. I arrive in Santiago on March 8 – I said.

- You can't imagine how happy I am, *gata pra caralho*. I'll pick you up at the airport. I want to take you to my family's beach house and make love to you all day – Cristián replied, reassuring me that I was doing the right thing.

Two days later, however, when I was on my way to Koh Rong Island, he simply stopped responding to my messages and we never spoke again.

104 – ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS AT SEA

The hostel where I was able to exchange work for accommodation was on a pretty private beach. I had no idea that Cambodia had such a beautiful sea. Every day as I helped prepare breakfast, the clear blue of that crystal clear water stole my attention. How lucky I was able to stay for free in such a beautiful place.

Twice a week, the hostel hosted hundreds of backpackers for an electronic music party, and since I worked as a bartender at the party, I got good tips. Life was almost perfect, except for the forgiveness I needed to give Cristián for ignoring me right after I bought tickets to Chile.

I never thought I would have the guts to confess, but this is a book to exorcise my demons and show that, despite having a beautiful light of resilience and determination, I also have shadows of pain and need inside me. I knew I could have changed plans, postponed or even canceled my trip to Chile and thrown myself to Indonesia or the Philippines, but I still hoped to meet Cristián when I arrived in Santiago. I hate to admit it, but as I said, these are the pages of all my truths, even the ugliest ones.

Besides, I had a great excuse in case my expectations were not met: to meet Henry, my American friend from Koh Phangan, and also to make an extraordinary expedition with my friend Patricia through the Atacama Desert.

After ten days of living and working on the Cambodian seashore, I had to leave for the capital Phnom Penh to do my biometrics for my transit visa at the Australian embassy.

The night before I left the island, I sat on a rock by the sea and watched the full moon rise in an unbelievable orange hue. While the sky was still darkening on the horizon, I had another beautiful internal conversation that resulted in another love letter for myself.

Kon Rong, 23 February, 2019.

You've been through this before. You also thought Felipe's wound would never heal, but it closed. Cristian's wound is infinitely smaller and less painful. You know what to do.

He's also just a human being looking for the experiences that make the most sense in his life. You have nothing to forgive him for, forgive yourself for placing so much expectation on a travel adventure. He is not to blame for anything.

You are always with yourself. You are the only one who can take care of you and comfort you. You can cry today, everything is fine.

But this trip still has magical experiences waiting for you. Stay open. You deserve to enjoy this amazing trip that you have sought until the end.

I love you and I keep holding your hand.

105 – A VISA AND A CHANCE

It had been 18 days since I had applied for a transit visa to Australia. The average deadline to be granted was 15 to 20 days and I had not yet received any embassy position. When I made the connection at the airport in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I could not board.

For 15 seconds I was in despair, but then I took a deep breath and told myself that I had a problem to solve and tears and regrets would not help.

I called the Australian embassy, but the clerk said I had no prediction and that all I had to do was wait or buy a direct ticket from Auckland. I should have done it from the start, but I didn't realize the connection that made the ticket cheaper by $300 would be in Australia.

I booked a hostel for three nights in downtown Kuala Lumpur and delayed my ticket. Since there was nothing else to do, I was grateful for the opportunity to get to know another Asian country and decided to make the most of my days in Malaysia. Something inside me was still telling me to cancel New Zealand and Chile and leave for the Philippines, and to be sure of what to do, I wanted to be quiet in the coming days, including on social networks.

The only exception I made was to video chat with Stephany, a former co-worker whom I only came to call my friend as we started to virtually talk upon my arrival in Bangkok. With her, I shared the anxieties of waiting for the visa and my quest for self-knowledge and spiritual connection. My moody sister Stephany also had access to my deepest sentimental secrets. Because we were alike in our emotions, I felt understood and welcomed by her.

In my days in Kuala Lumpur, I walked through Chinatown, through the Petronas Towers, and the beautiful and colorful Hindu temples of the Batu Caves. I recorded a little of everything, but only posted a summary on my last day as I drove to the airport.

Inside the subway, I was overwhelmed by a sense of belonging. I looked at the expressions of people coming and going around the city and felt inexplicable compassion. Does anyone here knows they are their own universe? Am I aware of that myself?

I wondered what pain these people were carrying, and I could see that, just like me, they were all doing their best to have some comfort in their souls, to feel happiness and peace. We are unique, but at the same time, we are all the same. I cried and made peace with my last choices. It was time to go to Chile.

I arrived at check-in without any news of the visa and, as I could

not board, bought a direct ticket to the capital of New Zealand.

106 – THIS TOO SHALL PASS

I made peace with the fact that Auckland became just a long connection on my trip through Oceania. I had only spent two days in other countries before and agreed with myself to come back with more time to visit Australia as well. Besides, everything was so expensive after spending so many months in Asia that I was glad I didn't have much time to spend money.

I even postponed my ticket to Chile, and an hour later gave up the crazy change and went back to the original plan. To fix everything, I spent another $300 dollars on fees and had on hours of counseling with Stephany on endless late-night video calls.

Now, I could tell you about the incredible places I visited in the capital of New Zealand, the peace that flooded me in the late afternoon as I watched the seagulls fly over the marina or the fun Germans I met at the hostel. But what was most special about New Zealand in me was the feeling I had since I woke up on March 8, knowing that the big day had come.

It was raining, and as I carried my backpacks toward the bus stop, I was immensely proud of my entire journey there.

Just like in Turkey, I found myself "completing a phase" and had a million reasons to give thanks for everything I chose to live in those intense months. It was International Women's Day and I was the most amazing woman in the world! The one that came out without a destination, with a broken heart and one desire: to be happy.

And how happy I was! I didn't even know it was possible to be so happy, even in the face of the painful consequences that came with some choices, I was very happy and could only give thanks for each experience and for each person with whom I had so far connected.

I would finally complete a trip around our planet Earth!

It felt like waking up from a wonderful dream and finding it to be true. But just as this truth dazzled me, it scared me. The biggest dream of my life was coming to an end.

While feeling a euphoria for living the exciting reality of the moment, I also lived an immense nostalgia. I immediately remembered the night I was in the colorful light bar in Greece, the billiard balls hitting the table and Laurent singing "beautiful girl" to my ears. I knew I would miss that moment forever. The moments I most wanted to perpetuate, the smells, colors, sounds, and touches I recorded in my memory would never come back. In those moments, I wish I could relive everything and never get to the point of crossing the ocean.

In the end, the beauty of the trip was not in the "around the

world" itself, but in the journey until its fulfillment. And again, the universe came as a punch in the stomach and told me that everything passes. Whatever good or bad, absolutely everything passes.

107 – DON'T KISS THE HUNGARIAN BOY

After 10 hours of flight between Auckland and Santiago, I still faced another hour's flight to Calama and 1h30 on a bus to San Pedro do Atacama. My only meal in the last 13 hours had been a bag of potato chips at the Calama bus station.

It was very cold when I got into the hostel, but I was warmly welcomed by a group of three French, one Hungarian, one Mexican, and one Australian who were drinking beer. I took a shower to warm up and joined them. My body was exhausted, but the time difference from New Zealand to Chile was 16 hours and I didn't feel sleepy.

It was after midnight and Marcelo, the hostel's Brazilian receptionist, told me that there was no open place where I could buy something to eat. I accepted a glass of beer and ended up joining everyone on a private party in the middle of the desert.

A pickup truck lit the small valley between two dunes and functioned both as a soundboard and bar. Ahead, another improvised drum with a board also served cheap drinks with ice of questionable origin. I heard someone shouting at people to put the plastic bottles and cups in the trash bags, but it was impossible to see where those bags were in the darkness.

There was no moon and the sky was incredibly starry and colorful. Gabor, the shy Hungarian with small brown eyes and a gray beard, offered me a glass of rum and Coke. I had been keeping an eye on him from the moment I arrived at the hostel.

- I came to this party because of you – I told him, balancing my body weight on the tip of my toes so he could listen to me and I got only a side smile.

Embarrassed by his silence, I grabbed my cell phone and tried to make a video that showed at least some of that crazy party in the middle of the aridest desert in the world.

- Wait – Gabor took my arm – you said you came to the party for what reason?

- Because of you – I smiled looking to the side – But don't worry…

- What do you mean? – he interrupted me.

- I meant that if you want to kiss me – now I was looking straight into his eyes – you can do it anytime you want.

He didn't wait any second longer. Everyone around us celebrated the new couple and I already felt dizzy because of the liquor.

The last thing I remember that night is lying next to Gabor on one

of the dunes, looking at the Milky Way. I remember wanting to photograph that starry sky, but the camera on my phone couldn't capture that incredible beauty.

I woke up after noon, sweating inside my nylon jacket. My fanny pack was still around my body and I was still wearing sneakers. I couldn't find my phone anywhere, and I remembered that after the failed photo of the stars, I lay in Gabor's arms and I don't know where I had put it.

I got out of bed with a single concern. Henry was to arrive from Bolivia that afternoon, and I had no way of contacting him. When I left the room, Henry was with his backpack in front of the door.

- How did you find me here? – I shouted as I jumped into his arms in a way that was probably frightening to an American.

- This is the cheapest hostel in the whole city. – He smiled, returning my warm hug.

108 – COMPLETELY NAKED

Henry and I were well used to surviving on a limited budget in Thailand, but prices in Chile were easily compared to those in Europe, with the peculiarities of a desert. So anything in Sao Pedro do Atacama cost a fortune. Without my cell phone, I could not access my bank account to transfer money to my German card, and I had no more limit on my Brazilian credit card thanks to the ticket exchange that followed the Australian transit visa problem. A Visa which, by the way, was approved after 33 days, when I was already planning to leave Chile.

We rented a bike and cycled over 15 kilometers in a single day to see the Valley of the Moon. Henry smoked his pot on the dunes and we took lots of pictures together. On the way back, I let the bike roll free down the road while repeating aloud, "I deserve all this happiness."

When Henry left, I took a bus to Calama, bought a new cell phone, and on my return to San Pedro I started looking for work at the city's travel agencies and hostels. I made a resume of all the professions I had done throughout my journey and went out delivering it door to door.

Patricia, my friend from Paraná with whom I had met in Toronto, almost a year before, would arrive in a few days to make a weeklong expedition through the desert. I really wanted to do the expedition for two reasons: camping one night in the desert and climbing to the crater of Lascar volcano, the most active in northern Chile. But I was still uncertain about this possibility because at that moment my financial situation was very delicate.

One morning, while I was drinking some instant coffee, I met a German and a Russian in the lockers of the hostel, and they asked me if I would like to go to Guatin to explore a waterfall in the middle of the desert. I was ready to decline the invitation when one of them said, "Let's get a ride on the road."

That was like music to my ears. A penniless desert adventure just for a waterfall bath? Of course I'm in! I changed clothes immediately, filled my water bottle, and put the sunscreen in my bag.

We walked for about three kilometers until we left town and we waited for over 40 minutes before the girls started talking about giving up. The sun was getting hotter and hotter, and everyone said that throughout the day the streams that cut the Atacama tend to dry up.

- Let's wait for another car, girls. I feel like our air-conditioned ride is on its way – I said, very optimistically.

Less than five minutes later, an SUV stopped at our nod.

- Guatin? – The driver asked. – We have only one place if you don't mind tightening up a little! – He showed the two children of seven or eight years old in the backseat.

- If that's okay with them, that's fine with us.

The Chilean family told us about some traditional festivals in the village of Guatin and also about the meanings of some ancestral origin words. I was trying to understand accelerated Spanish, but it was hard to understand every word. Still, I could understand the context of the conversation between them and my German friend. The Russian certainly didn't understand a word and just stared at the orange landscape through the car's closed windows.

Our driver left us a few miles before the village entrance, informing us that in order to find the waterfalls we had to follow the wettest trail on the left. The cell phone map said there was a river, but we could only see a path of wet sand.

We walked optimistically, always following the wettest trail until, finally, a small stream appeared before us and guided the rest of our little expedition. As the amount of water got more significant, we felt even more excited. All around us, among the mountains, there was only sand, rocks, and some cacti. A few meters further from where we stopped for some photos, we heard the sound of a waterfall.

We were above the fall and had to go down a small rock wall. Below, two stone walls surrounded the small valley. I took off my clothes, only wearing a bikini and the Russian warned:

- I hope you don't mind, but I didn't bring a top.

At this point, I felt completely comfortable and took off my top too. I had gone topless on a much-crowded beach in Spain. I was only among women and I thought it was unlikely that anyone would find us in that waterfall in the middle of the desert.

The Russian smiled in thanks and then the German also took off her top.

We took turns under the waterfall, and when it was my turn, I couldn't resist. I wanted to feel nature all over my body. I wanted to be completely naked in the waterfall.

- Sorry girls, but I won't forgive myself if I leave without doing this. I took off my bikini bottom too and stepped under the waterfall. Before leaning my head on the rock behind me, I heard the Russian celebrate.

The power of the water was unbelievable given the size of the small stream that formed the highest waterfall. The water was deliciously cold and I smiled with satisfaction. – Thank you for this most unforgettable experience, dear universe.

When I came out of my immersion, my fellow adventurers were

also completely naked and wanted to bathe again in the waterfall.

We took pictures of each other and then each one retreated to their own place. As I meditated, feeling the relentless sun dry my hair, I listened to the tighter waterfall, and when I opened my eyes, I could no longer see the mist formed by the force of the waters.

It was after 3 pm, and if we took too long to get a ride back, we could get very cold after sunset.

We put on our clothes in silence, climbed the rock wall, and reached the roadside happy about our afternoon in the hidden waterfall in the driest desert on the planet.

109 – ALWAYS LEARNING

I was already at Atacama for ten days. My skin was already cracked from the dryness. I rubbed dexpanthenol lotion several times a day around my body, but it wasn't enough. Every morning, when I blew my nose, there was blood. The only advantage was that I washed my clothes in a small bucket and it took less than 2 hours for them to be completely dry.

When Patricia arrived from an adventure in Patagonia, I had already solved all my problems concerning my banking access. She gave me a very special deal so I could make the expedition with the same benefits of the other girls. I believe she totally gave up her share of the profit to put me among the women-only group, and I was immensely grateful.

When I met Patricia a few years earlier, during a volunteer work in Parana, she was beginning to travel the world as a nomad. I can't tell if what I felt was exactly jealousy. Somehow, I already desired to throw myself into the world without destiny, only that I had got married to Felipe very early, and at the time, it was much easier to blame external circumstances than to assume the consequences of my own choices. So to bear with my own frustration, I told myself that this life was easier for her since she probably had a rich family.

Now, after traveling a year and learning to live with minimal resources, I knew of the sacrifices she had probably made to live her dream too.

The days with the expedition girls were fun and lively. We took unforgettable walks through breathtaking landscapes. The night in the desert was special, with a lot of wine, lots of dancing and marshmallows at the bonfire.

Anxious to share all the adventures I had experienced over the past few months, I didn't realize I was babbling too much, leaving no room for all the girls to express themselves. It was an ego blow to hear that from the one whom I had the weakest connection. At the time, I wanted to deny it, complain about it, and say she was wrong, but somehow I knew there was a lesson to be learned there, and I decided to take her words in humility, though that wasn't easy at the moment.

The night before I climbed the volcano, I went to bed in distress for the future. I just wondered: go home or keep traveling?

110 – A WOMAN IN DEVELOPMENT

The cars stopped at Laguna Lejia before sunrise. With the first rays of sunshine, the snow-capped mountains reflected in the water like a mirror, duplicating the landscape. As if just one version of that amazing place was too little to fill anyone's eyes with.

I spent a few minutes trying not to think of the cold as I stared at the reflection in the water. For a second, I forgot the freezing sensation on the tip of my nose and asked myself, What next? Where should I go?

I didn't have time to think about the answer. The mountain guide assembled the group to instruct us on how to climb the Lascar volcano crater, 5,600 meters above sea level. From there, the top of the mountain seemed close, but the biggest challenge, he said, was oxygen, not distance.

In the brief explanation, I learned that our bodies drastically experience any extra effort when 2,400 meters above sea level, because the air becomes thinner. This means that oxygen molecules are not as close together as they are at sea level. I remembered learning about it in high school science classes, but I never thought I'd feel it.

- Breathe more deeply and slowly so that your lungs can catch more oxygen and send it to the brain and the rest of the body through your blood – Checho explained in a very understandable *portunhol*.[25]

When the cars finally parked at the top of the road, each of us was given a trail stick to help us climb. The Lascar volcano is still active and its last eruption was in 2006, so the entire mountain is made up of rocks and volcanic sand, making the trek to the top quite unstable.

Within the first 30 minutes of walking, the guide set a water stop for the whole group. He recommended constant hydration, but in small quantities. My head had already started hurting, and the difficulty in breathing made me question my ability to reach the top. I had never done anything like that in my life. I didn't even like hiking.

We were all silent when the expedition started again. Even talking was an extremely tiring activity there. Patricia noticed my tiredness and approached me gently.

- Count each breath, Paula. 1, 2. 1, 2… – she said softly.

I focused my attention on my steps and followed her advice. I counted each inhale and each exhale, which were synchronized with my steps. The cold air coming in through my nose filled my entire chest and diaphragm.

At each stop to drink water, we witnessed the bleak desert

landscape getting bigger and more stunning behind us. Miles of ice-covered yellow mountains under an unbelievably blue sky.

Pauses were the only moments when I forgot my breathing and allowed other thoughts to consume me. One was about nature being so present at times. If I tried to climb faster, I would simply pass out. I could even die. “If I can’t control the speed of my steps, how can I control the events of my life,” I laughed internally.

When we were about halfway up the mountain, one of the girls started to get sick. She didn’t want to give up, but she needed to make more stops. However, our group’s pauses needed to be controlled, as the temperature of -5C degrees rapidly cooled the body, requiring more oxygen in the bloodstream to keep us warm.

With that, unfortunately, the group could not wait for her and a greater distance was opening. Patricia and Pedro, the other guide, were behind following her pace.

It was about three kilometers of climbing. I lost count of how many times during the trip I walked that distance to save money on transportation. But here, three kilometers was an eternity. With less than a kilometer to the top, the first blocks of ice began to appear and our colleague gave up the climb. She went down accompanied by Pedro and Patricia continued to reach the group.

Checho warned that we still had almost an hour’s walk. It was hard to believe because I could already see the smoke from the crater right before my eyes. Although the time sounded challenging, seeing the top so close gave me the strength to carry on. With every step and every breath I counted, I mentally repeated my new mantra: “Focus on the goal and take one step at a time.”

The guide, who always followed behind the group, accelerated a little on the final stretch to register our arrival with the cell phone. I was first in line and I could already feel the emotion overflowing my whole body. The smell of sulfur was like a mountain incense welcoming us.

The wind blew more violently and the tears welling up in my eyes quickly dried. I can’t explain what was the feeling that came over me. There was no thought in my mind. I just cried and looked at that creepy hole, full of earth and stones, blowing white smoke and telling myself that within me pulsed the same force that makes lava rivers explode from the center of the earth.

I sat in silence for a few minutes, sitting on the edge of the crater, watching the horizon across the volcano get lost in more icy-yellow mountains.

When my thoughts were finally organized, I returned to Caraiva. I looked at myself sitting in the window of that bus, sad, shattered and hopeless, and heard the same question: “Who is the woman I want to

be?”

- I am not the stories you told me. I am not who my parents and my teachers said I was. I am not who I believed to be for all these years. I am not the sad experiences that I had. I am not people’s perceptions of me. I am who I allow myself to be every day. I am the courage and strength that each of my experiences brought forth in me.

There, in a volcano in the Atacama Desert, I discovered that I am who I want to be.

There, high up in Lascar, I discovered it was time to come back to Brazil. For how long? My heart is the universe and it will let me know.

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notes

Notes

1

Cachaça is the brazilian most famous rum. The spirit is a sort of liquor distilled from fermented sugarcane juice and it's the strongest alcoholic drink in Brazil. It contains between 38 to 54 percent alcohol by volume.

2

Momo also known as Rei Momo (King Momo) is a symbol of the Brazilian Carnival. It's inspired by a Greek Mythological character that personifies irony. However, in Brazil, the character is adapted to the Carnival festivities as someone who likes Carnival and is preferable overweight. He should be nice, playful, and good-humored.

3

Recreio dos Bandeirantes is a noble neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro.

4

Forró can be referred to either a type of party and dance – typical of the Northeastern region of Brazil – or a brazilian type of music. As the type of music the most common combination of instruments which is defined as the base of forró was the one created by Luiz Gonzaga; including an accordion, a triangle and a zabumba played by a trio. Some common types of Forró are Arrasta-pé, Xote and Baião.

5

Netuno is a typical alcoholic drink from the Southern region of Bahia state in Brazil.

6

A woman born in the state of Bahia, Brazil.

7

A man born in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

Main square in Trancoso, Bahia.

9

Small car.

10

Pagode is a music rhythm from Brazil, which has many elements of Samba.

11

Curitiba is the capital and largest city in the Brazilian state of Paraná.

12

An ancient colonial house recently located in the centre of Santa Teresa, the most traditional and bohemian quarter of Rio de Janeiro, close to Lapa.

13

The Brazilian real is the official currency of Brazil.

14

Diário de Pernambuco (Pernambuco Daily) is a newspaper published in Recife, Brazil.

15

Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa was a Portuguese poet, writer, literary critic, translator, publisher and philosopher, described as one of the most significant literary figures of the 20th century and one of the greatest poets in the Portuguese language.

16

Lulu Santos, stage name of Luiz Maurício Pragana dos Santos, is a Brazilian singer and guitarist.

17

Nothing that was will be
Again the way it once was
Everything passes
Everything will always pass.
Life comes in waves like the sea
In infinite comings and goings
All you see is not
Just like what we saw a second ago
Everything changes all the time in the world
No use pretending
Or lying
To yourself now
There's so much life out there
And here always
Like a wave in the sea

18

“Don’t touch the drinks, girls. I don’t intend to be a female tourist stolen by Thai prostitutes” is what Paula said in Portuguese.

19

Imenjá is the goddess of the sea. She's a central deity in the Candomblé religion. She is concerned with every aspect of womanhood, fertility and family. She's very powerful and she watches over sailors and fishermen and she protects the children. She's often depicted as a mermaid and usually dresses white or blue.

20

Favelas is the word used to characterize habitational areas similar to slums and shantytowns.

21

We are crazy

22

What else then. I'm still here thinking about how good it was, how good it was.

23

I want to show Paulinha to mom.

In Portuguese, “Pai” means “Father”.

25

Portunhol is the mixture of Spanish and Portuguese languages, usually used by both Portuguese and Spanish speakers so they can understand one another more easily.